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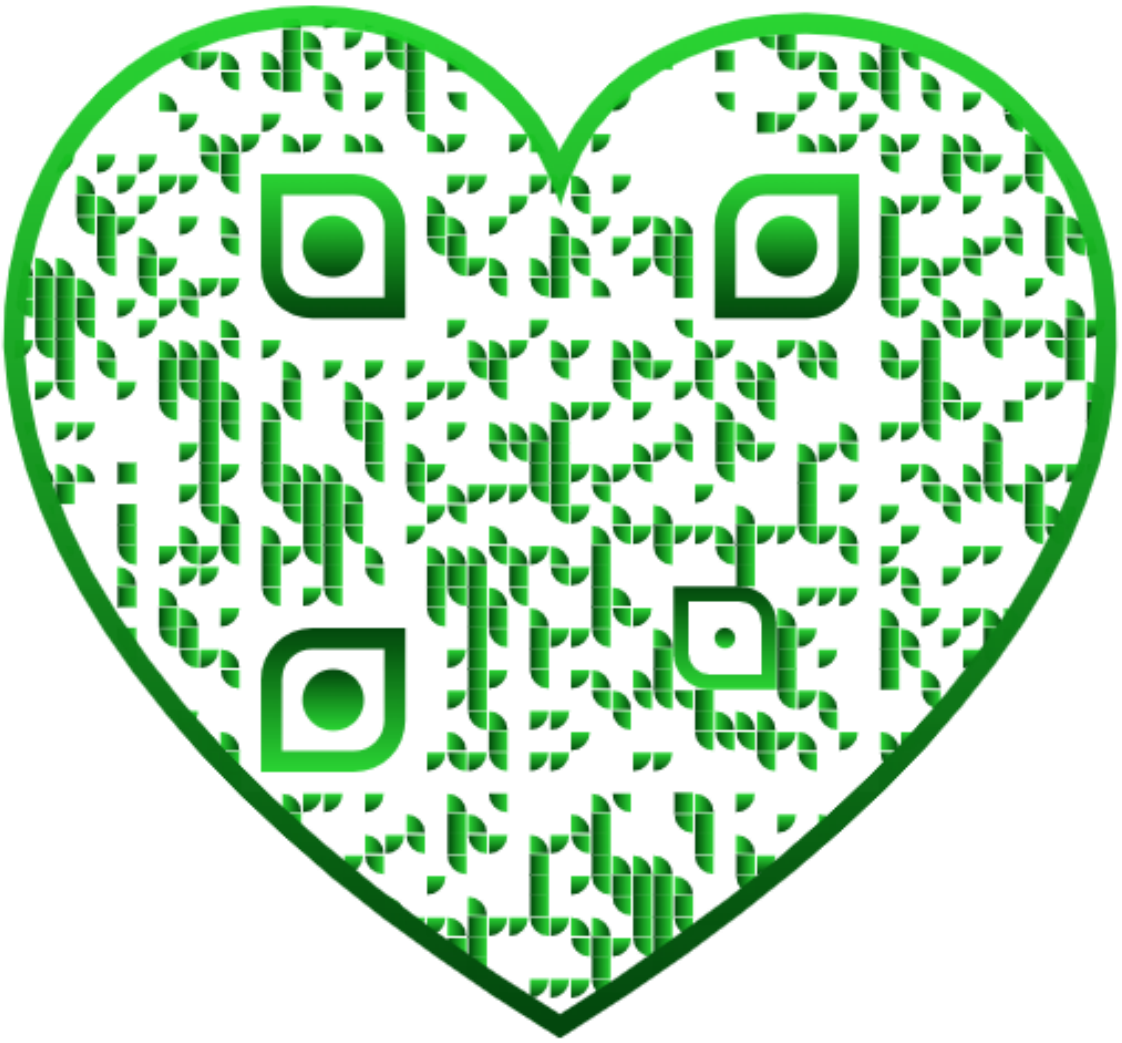

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SEPTEMBER 2023

inside

ON THE COVER

22 **Kris Davis**
At the Vanguard
BY JOHN MURPH

In late May 2022, pianist and composer Kris Davis realized a dream. She and her ensemble Diatom Ribbons performed six nights at the world's most famous jazz venue — New York City's Village Vanguard. It's been documented on *Kris Davis' Diatom Ribbons Live At The Village Vanguard,* put out on her own Pyroclastic Records. She discusses her journey in her first DownBeat cover article.

"I won't sit and cry by the phone, waiting for it to ring," says the multi-talented drummer and composer Tyshawn Sorey. "I'll produce my own projects. Where I do that, I'll do it my way, and I'll do it well."

Cover photo by Caroline Mardok

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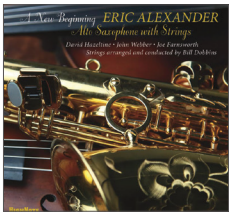

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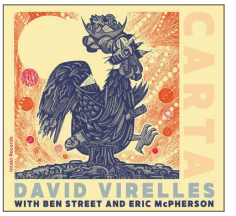

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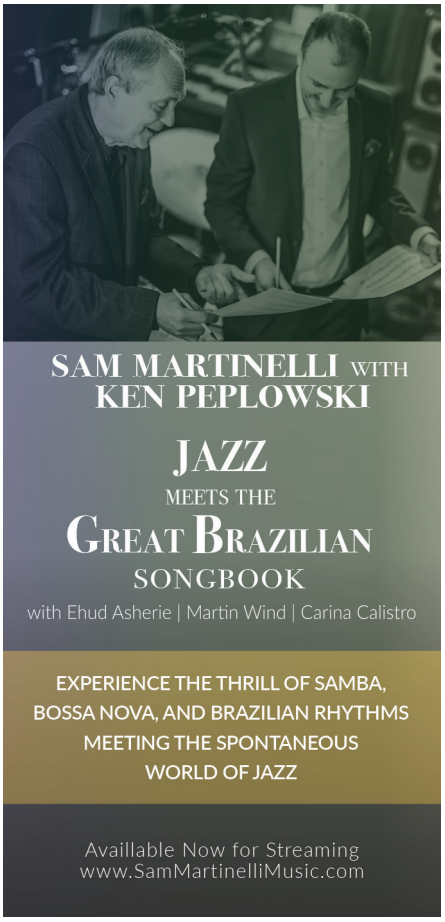

DANE MOON

Bennett's passing ends what was perhaps the longest sustained career as a star in show business history.

Tony Bennett, Rest In Peace

TONY BENNETT, WHO ASCENDED TO THE top of American popular music a year before Queen Elizabeth ascended to the throne in England 71 years ago, died July 21, in New York City. He was 96.

"Tony left us today but he was still singing the other day at his piano and his last song was 'Because Of You,' his first #1 hit," his social media pages reported.

Bennett's passing ends what is almost certainly the longest sustained career as a star performer in the annals of show business history.

The wonder of it all is that over that huge arc, Bennett managed to change so little. In his first extended DownBeat interview in June 1954, he seemed suspicious of his recent string of popular hits and charted his preferred future. "I'd like to make an album," he told Nat Hentoff, "where I go in and just blow. No special arrangements. A very relaxed album of standards away from the commercially stylized records we've been making." It would happen a number of times in different ways, none more elegantly than in his 1976 sessions with Bill Evans.

Bennett planted himself like a sequoia in the soil of the American Popular Songbook and made himself a stubborn bulwark of tradition against the storm of fads. He would become the eternal defender of the faith long after the rest of the world moved on. It was a repertoire he never aged out of, although by the time he passed 90, audiences might have chuckled at the irony of hearing him sing "as I approach the prime of my life" in the verse to "This Is All I Ask."

He sprang into the big time at age 25 in the summer of 1951, propelled by strength of the sudden success of "Because Of You," which he had recorded for Columbia in April of that year. Network Radio and 78 rpm records were nearing the end of their reign as Bennett began his.

Over the next seven decades, as he evolved from pop sensation to senior statesman, he never seriously slipped from the top ranks of the most admired and respected singers in music. His celebrated recent partnerships with Lady Gaga, Diana Krall and others kept him a stadium act in the contemporary music scene, while his regular solo concerts at Radio City, Ravinia, Carnegie Hall and The Hollywood Bowl represented a lineage of living cultural memory that connected audiences to a vastly different time in mid-20th century America.

For most it became a rare chance to glimpse a surviving symbol of continuity winding back into the final days of the great songwriters a decade before singers became their own writers. It helped that well into his 90s, Bennett continued to perform in top form, even as he became ravaged by Alzheimer's Disease.

It also helped that from the beginning his classicism was leavened by direct jazz influences. "I always wanted a jazzman with me," he told Dom Cerulli in a May 1958 DownBeat interview. There was never a time when Bennett was not in proximity to the finest players. Ralph Sharon, Ruby Braff, Harold Jones, and Gray Sargent were part of his working groups, and there were encounters with Count Basie, Herbie Hancock, Candito, Herbie Mann, Neal Hefti and Bill Charlap among many others. "For me," he told Cerulli, "having jazzmen with me means I never get stale." **DB**

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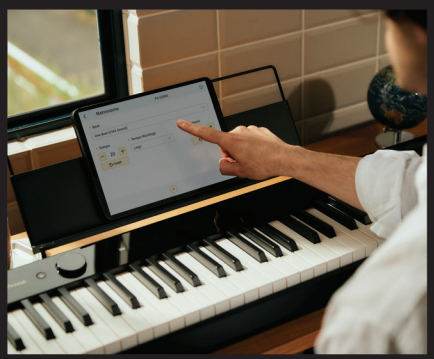

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Chords & Discords

Red Fan!

Thank you, Veterans Committee, for something I wanted to see for over 50 years. Red Norvo is in the Hall of Fame [August Critics Poll issue]. All of us who play xylophone thank you. Next, on to the person who discovered this year's [Hall of Fame] inductee Alice Coltrane … that being Terry Gibbs, who finished his new recording … at age 98 and two-thirds.

MARSHALL ZUCKER
WANTAGH, NEW YORK

Editor's Note: *We asked readers if we should keep separate categories for male and female vocalists. Here are two responses.*

Lose 'em

I feel that breaking down vocalists by gender is a meaningless exercise. DownBeat should lead the way and send a signal to others to get this right.

LELAND VERHEYEN
VIA EMAIL

Keep 'em

I don't think that having separate categories for male and female vocalists is any more "quaint" than having separate categories for bass and electric bass or the saxophones. They are two separate instruments, very much separated by tone and range.

CHRIS KRONICK
VIA EMAIL

Harland MIA?

No Eric Harland in the best drummer category? This must be the worst oversight in the entire 71st Critics Poll.

MATTHEW HANLEY
YUCCA VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

Lovin' Threadgill

First of all, I want to thank Aaron Cohen for his terrific review of Henry Threadgill's new memoir, *Easily Slip Into Another World: A Life in Music* [July issue]. I had no idea that Mr. Threadgill had a book out, and was delighted to read about it. Of course I read his whole review, but I knew right with his second sentence, where he calls the book a "remarkable memoir," that I was going to read it.

I am roughly 200 pages into the book right now (our local library had it on their shelf!), and I can't remember another autobiography where I just couldn't wait to read more. Please, do a cover feature on Mr. Threadgill. With this book, which Amazon calls a best seller, a lot of people would be very interested in hearing from him.

Since I got into jazz in the early '70s, the AACM Chicagoans — Muhal Richard Abrams, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith and many others — were some of the musicians/composers I was really getting into. Later in the '70s, I became a huge Air fan. I still listen to these records whenever I can. As a young drummer, I loved Steve McCall's playing, as well as Mr. Threadgill's hubkaphone.

It would be incredible if you could do a feature story, perhaps a roundtable type of discussion, with some of these musicians.

Thank you for the excellent work.

BOB ZANDER
PALO ALTO, CA

Coffin Corner

You should be ashamed for publishing this critical review of Jeff Coffin's latest album [July issue]. Either support the music or remain silent.

WAYNE BRANCO
VIA FACEBOOK

Editor's Note: Music critics are not cheerleaders. Their job is to listen with an open ear and judge it. But we get it — one person's dessert is another's dumpster fire.

Corrections & Clarifications

We hate mistakes, but 'fess up and apologize when we make 'em. DownBeat regrets these errors:

- In July, Jamaaladeen Tacuma's name was misspelled on the Inside page.
- In July, in a review of the self-titled debut by People of Earth: "Chiki" and "Shoulda Known Better" are corrected song titles.
- In July, Sexmob was misspelled in a review of the group's new album, *The Hard Way*.
- In the August issue, the photographer for the Ahmad Jamal article was Don Bronstein.

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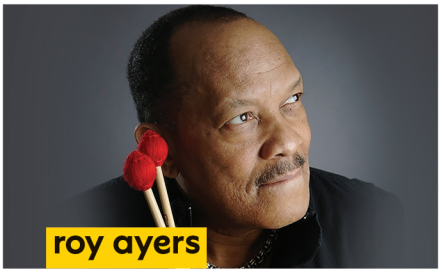

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EBRU YIDIZ

Ceramic Dog is, from right, Shahzad Ismaily, Ches Smith and Ribot.

Marc Ribot's Rock Dreams

There's an unrepentant snarl to Marc Ribot's voice on twisted tunes like "Subsidiary," "Soldiers In The Army Of Love" and "Heart Attack" from *Connection*, the fifth release by his punk-edged power trio Ceramic Dog.

The wildly eclectic guitarist, who has recorded and toured with Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, Laurie Anderson, Susana Baca and Solomon Burke, was a member of the Lounge Lizards and the Jazz Passengers, and is a frequent collaborator on John Zorn projects like Bar Kokhba, Electric Masada, Book of Angels and The Dreamers. He has cut a remarkably wide swath stylistically since the 1980s. His own bands have reflected the depth and scope of his musical engagement, from his son-based Los Cubanos Postizos band to his harmolodic Philly soul group, The Young Philadelphians (with fellow guitarist Mary Halvorson, electric bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma, drummer G. Calvin Weston and three-piece string section) to his swinging B-3 trio The Jazz-Bins (with organist Greg Lewis and drummer Chad Taylor) and free-jazz group Spiritual Unity (with trumpeter Roy Campbell, bassist Henry Grimes and drummer Taylor). Ribot has also interpreted the beguiling melodies of his mentor, the Haitian-born guitarist-composer Frantz Casséus. In fact, in 1989 he recorded his *Haitian Suite* and in 2014 published a collection of newly discovered Casséus compositions with *Guitar Works*. But his Ceramic Dog has another bark entirely.

A kind of stripped-down, skronkier version of Ribot's Rootless Cosmopolitans band of the 1990s, this fringe rock trio featuring bassist Shahzad Ismaily and drummer Ches Smith has maintained a scorched-earth policy since debuting in 2008 with *Party Intellectuals*. Along the way they've also turned in stinging parodies of familiar tunes. For example, on 2013's *Your Turn*, there was Paul Desmond's "Take Five"; on *Connection,* it's the Hollywood classic "That's Entertainment."

"It's a rock record, for sure," said Ribot in a phone interview from his home in Brooklyn, a day before embarking on a European tour

with Ceramic Dog. "I've always had big affection for No Wave. When I was coming up in New Jersey, playing in my junior high school band Love Gun and just figuring out what I liked, when No Wave came along, I said, "OK, this is for me." And I see that term No Wave in a larger category that also includes the Ornette Coleman's Prime Time band, Sonny Sharrock and James Blood Ulmer, as well as groups like Richard Hell & The Voidoids with guitarist Robert Quine or DNA with guitarist Arto Lindsay.

"But it seems like I've kind of approached it a little indirectly. Rootless Cosmopolitans was a quasi-New Music but also jazz influenced project that was secretly a rock band. And Los Cubanos Postizos was a son Cubano group that was secretly a punk rock band. So that kind of quasi/secret thing continued through a long line of projects until eventually I just said, 'Fuck it! I'm just going to do a rock band.' And that's what Ceramic Dog is. And in the five records that we've done, I feel like it's gotten more and more focused in that direction."

While there are some more ambitious compositions on *Connection*, like the salsa-son informed "Ecstasy" and the cumbia flavored "Crumbia" (with Ribot making a rare appearance on English horn), Ribot goes directly for the jugular on tunes like "Soldiers In The Army Of Love" and the instrumental polytonal rocker "No Name." As he explained, "The bass line on 'No Name' is in one key and the horn lines start to go into unrelated keys. I added a noise element from the sympathetic strings of an electric sitar, and then Anthony Coleman overdubbed Farfisa organ on it. And Anthony was able to really get the concept that I wanted — absolutely straightahead soul-jazz comping, but polytonal. I wanted complete cliches in terms of the phrases, but they had to be bridging the gap. So Anthony's keyboard functions as a kind of glue between these other unrelated keys."

Ribot's love of clever wordplay is apparent on carefully constructed "word salads" like "The Activist" from 2021's *Hope* (recorded under strict pandemic protocols at Ismaily's Brooklyn based Figure 8 studio) and tunes like "Heart Attack" and "Subsidiary" from *Connection*.

"I've always written songs, and some of them have made their way onto these band project records," he said. "What I feel like I've developed more recently is the ability to rant. And I was becoming more and more deranged in my rants until I realized if I wrote them down on paper that they were useful in some way. So now it's like I've kind of developed this ability to speak in tongues. And I have a process that I use. First, I just kind of rant the lyrics, and then I carefully comb through them to see if there's anything that suggests a narrative or makes sense, and I edit that out. But a lot of it is sonic. I'm interested in perturbing unconscious associations and sonics."

As for his aggressive ranting on "Heart Attack," Ribot explained, "I was interested in the music of cursing in different languages, the sonics of it. You'll notice when men are cursing in English, they constrict the words in a certain way: "Fock! Fuck you, you fockin' fuck!" And there's a certain rhythm to it. So I was interested in that. And then I made the "B" section cursing in Italian because there's also a certain rhythm, a different rhythm, to cursing in Italian. Those little national differences are interesting to me."

Elsewhere, Ribot's love of skronk (aided by the sound his Fender Jaguar makes when fed through a distortion pedal and assaulted with wreckless abandon) comes across on the distortion-laced manifesto "Subsidiary," the free-jazz blowout "Swan" (featuring guest James Brandon Lewis on tenor sax), the ferocious title track and Ceramic Dog's Sex Pistols-ish take on "That's Entertainment" (with Coleman providing the mocking farfisa organ). And his love of Hendrixian chords comes out on his delicate minor-key instrumental "Order Of Protection," which is reminiscent of Jimi's "Little Wing" and "Villanova Junction" and also features his Jazz-Bins partner Greg Lewis on organ.

Aside from the late Voidoids/Lou Reed sideman Robert Quine, Ribot also points to Fred Frith as an important guitar influence. "I'm a huge Frith fan," he said. "One of my main introductions to free improvisation was his records with Henry Kaiser, *With Friends Like These* and *Who Needs Enemies?* Hearing those albums for the first time was a revelation to me, like, 'Wow, you can do this?!' I couldn't believe it. And it kind of gave me permission, which is the most you can hope to do for other people. But I've always told students and other guitarists that if they haven't seen Fred improvise solo, they must. Just to see him live, it has to be done. It's one of the wonders of the world. It's a necessary part of calling yourself a literate guitarist."

Earlier this year, Ribot unleashed his skronk at the Gucci Men's Fall Winter 2023 fashion show in Milan, where Ceramic Dog performed an 11-minute live version of their menacing "Lies My Body Told Me" as the models strolled the runway. "It was funny because afterwards, as I was breaking down my equipment, all these famous supermodels that were in the show were hanging around, and all they wanted to know is what kind of distortion pedal I was using. They all have bands, you know. They all play guitar."

Following Ceramic Dog's summer tour of Europe, Ribot will return to the States to perform his solo guitar score for Charlie Chaplin's 1921 silent film *The Kid* on Sept. 29 at Sacred Heart University Community Theatre in Fairfield, Connecticut. It's a piece he has showcased several times across the States since its 2010 premiere at New York's Merkin Hall, though he's never done it in Europe.

"It's a little problematical there because, apparently, Charlie Chaplin requested that his film only be performed with his score, a fact which I found out after I'd done the score for that film that was commissioned in 2008 by the New York Guitar Festival. So I've done it in the U.S., Canada and Japan, but I can't do it in Europe. It's against the law there."

—Bill Milkowski

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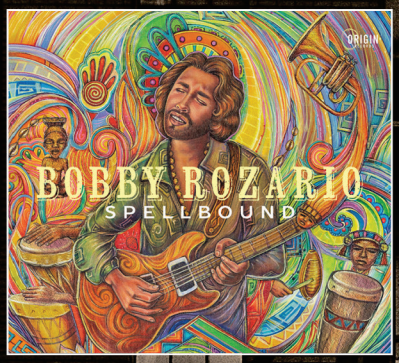

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DARDEN PURCELL
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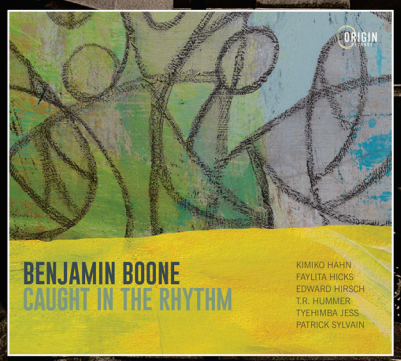

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featuring: 6 Poets / Kenny Werner / Ari Hoenig
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ROY COX

"This album is every little thing about Warren Wolf that I've been trying to do for almost 40 years," says Wolf of *Chano Pozo: Origins*.

Warren Wolf Beyond Vibes

WARREN WOLF IS DETERMINED TO DO IT all. More than 20 years into his career as a vibraphonist, drummer and composer, the Baltimore-based musician shares the true breadth of his musical talent.

"I'm releasing my 10th album as a bandleader, and I had to make something special," he says. "I decided to showcase myself: to write and play all the parts and let everyone know who Warren Wolf really is. Since I never wanted to be known as just a vibraphone player."

Starting his career as a classically-trained percussionist at the prestigious Peabody Preperatory at Johns Hopkins University, Wolf went on to study under Spyro Gyra vibraphonist Dave Samuels at Berklee College of Music and has since played with the likes of Christian McBride, Karreim Riggins and the SFJAZZ Collective. As a bandleader, his records have spanned from the R&B influences of 2020's *Reincarnation* to the hard-swinging intricacies of 2011's *Warren Wolf* and the breezy West Coast melodies of 2016's *Convergence*. Throughout, Wolf's vibraphone has been a steady, soulful presence, but it took the pandemic in 2020 to set him on a different path.

"Once everything was canceled and we had to stay home, I went onto YouTube and began practicing along to a bunch of jazz standards," he says, over a video call from his home. "I've played these songs so many times though, I knew them inside out, and I realized I needed something new to keep me fresh."

Wolf decided to put together a home recording setup and began laying down all of the parts to songs like Chick Corea's "Humpty Dumpty" and George Shearing's "Conception" through MIDI keyboard and Logic production software. He then left gaps for solos to be filled remotely by friends — including vibraphonist Joe Lock and saxophonist Walter Smith III.

"It sounded so good, it soon became about more than just practice," he says. "My friend, the drummer Lee Pearson, warned me that since I play lots of instruments, it would get addictive. To date, I've made around 160 tracks of everything from standards to new compositions, since I'm always looking for something different."

As the world began to reopen, Wolf felt creatively freed thanks to his production and self-recording knowledge. He also found himself as an independent artist once more, since his five-album deal with Mack Avenue had ended after the release of 2020's *Christmas Vibes*. With the path ahead cleared, it seemed like the natural option to continue with his solo experimentation to produce an album of original music, *Chano Pozo: Origins*.

Across the album's nine tracks, Wolf riffs on gospel Hammond organ during the meditative "Sunday Morning," frantically soloing on piano during the hard-swinging "Havoc" and even singing through talkbox on the D'Angelo cover "Lady." Aside from horns and guest vocals from Allison Bordlemay, *Chano Pozo* is all Wolf improvising and competing with himself to produce a seamless blend of self-sampling.

"This album is every little thing about Warren Wolf that I've been trying to do for almost 40 years," he says with a smile. "You're hearing the piano, drums, bass and composition — even my singing. It's the full spectrum of my musical upbringing, played exactly as I want it to be."

That upbringing was largely shaped by Wolf's father, Warren Wolf Sr., who worked as a history teacher by day but was a percussionist and music fanatic by night, often jamming and playing records by the likes of Roy Ayers and The Temptations in the Wolf family basement until the early hours. It was there, as a 3-year-old, that junior Wolf became entranced by the vibraphone, clambering up a chair to have a go at hitting its resonant surfaces. Spotting his interest, Wolf's father soon began giving him music lessons, along with the nickname Chano Pozo.

"I had no idea what that name meant as a kid — it was just something that everyone called me," Wolf says. "Later, I found out he was a percussionist who played with Dizzy Gillespie. Perhaps my father saw that same musical spirit in me, but I never got the chance to ask him why he called me that in the first place."

In 2022, Wolf's father passed away and *Chano Pozo* plays as a tribute to his memory, as well as an exorcism of Wolf's musical roots, channelling his childhood alter ego to traverse everything from '70s fusion to '90s G-funk, sensual soul and jazz melody. "I didn't grow up in a jazz household. I just came from a music household," Wolf says. "My dad played a lot of Motown and classical, and then I have two older sisters who played a bunch of '80s hip-hop. By 5, I was at Peabody Prep, and at 6, I had my first tour with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, when I thought I was going to be a classical musician. By 17, though, I was fully into jazz."

With that jazz interest sparked by a lesson spent improvising over Sonny Rollins' "Doxy," Wolf was soon accepted into Berklee and wound up with a weekly residency at Boston's renowned Wally's Cafe. There he developed an impressive aptitude for marathon sets, playing for three hours or more with the likes of classmates Kendrick Scott, Walter Smith III and Avishai Cohen. "It was just magical because we encouraged each other to write, and it gave me such confidence," he says. "The club owners gave us complete control to do what we wanted and that ethos of freedom has still stayed with me today."

Indeed, with tentative plans to put out a "metal jazz" record with Mars Volta drummer Thomas Pridgeon in the cards as well as the possibility of another solo record — writing, recording and producing each composition — Wolf's drive for freewheeling creativity continues.

"I just want to get our music heard by as many people as possible," Wolf says. "From taking listeners back to my origins to working out the improvised music of the future — it's all there to be played." —*Ammar Kalia*

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Lucian Ban and Mat Maneri bring jazz exploration to Enescu's opera *Oedipe Rex*.

Operatic Re-invention with some Jazz DNA

ON THE LIST OF AMBITIOUS AND PARA-digm-shifting jazz or jazz-related projects this season, Lucian Ban and Mat Maneri's version of the Enescu opera *Oedipe Rex*, aptly dubbed *Oedipe Redux*, occupies a unique and lofty position. The Transylvania-born/New York-based pianist Ban and American violist Maneri have gamely expanded on their earlier treatments of music by iconic Romanian composer George Enescu and taken on the challenge of transforming the infamously complex opera into a compact jazz-meets-new music chamber incarnation.

The result, performed at the Lyon Opera in 2018 and newly released by Sunnyside, can be called jazz, in its expansive and ever-evolutionary spirit, rather than any narrow definition. Then again, genre-blurring comes instinctively to Maneri and Ban. Ban feels that "the genius of jazz is this ability it has to cross genres, styles, borders, races, and reinvent itself through the individual voices of its practitioners." He adds, "Every occasion I get to spread the genius of my fellow countryman, George Enescu, is a worthy proposal."

The Ban-Maneri-Enescu collaborative link goes back 15 years, when Ban invited Maneri to join other "jazz" players to perform at an Ensescu Festival in Bucharest. Subsequently, the pair have processed the Romanian composer's music on the album *Enescu Re-imagined* and delved into Transylvanian folk music — an inspirational source for Enescu, Béla Bartók and others — on the ECM album *Transylvanian Concert* and the 2020 Sunnyside album *Transylvanian Folk Songs*.

Enescu's opera premiered in 1936 and has only recently been climbing out of relative obscurity into modern opera houses. The original notion of broaching the grand opera project, in fact, came through Maneri, who recalls that "hearing *Oedipe* stirred in me a deep feeling of the many ways humanity deals with suffering."

Maneri's interest in re-envisioning the opera naturally stuck a chord with Ban: "I said yes immediately because Enescu's *Oedipe* is a towering work of 20th century music and one of the greatest operas ever written. Of course, it was a mad idea, and it took us 10 years to make it happen."

Through an invitation from the Lyon Opera, as part of a French-Romanian festival, Ban explains that *Oedipe Redux* finally came to life.

"Mat and I wanted a chamber-like group to allow us to move seamlessly between improvisation and written material," he said. "It took George Enescu 26 years to finish his *Oedipe*, so our timeline is not too bad."

Oedipe Redux establishes its own musical parameters, between traditional expectations of jazz and classical forms and groupings. One distinction is that, through the parsing of parts and textures within the assembled ensemble, the sum sound can suggest greater dimensions than it contains. "We thought of how instruments blend, and which combinations can do justice to Enescu's rich and complex score," Ban says. "Viola blends amazingly with bass clarinet, but also with a trumpet. Between those you can get both power and the subtlety of a chamber ensemble. The right rhythm section can bring the drive of jazz into the picture but also sound like a contemporary classical group. What we wanted was a midsize group — think of Gil Evans' tentet on Prestige, or the Henry Threadgill groups of the late '80s and '90s — that can sound both like a jazz group and a contemporary classical ensemble. With the proper timbral palette and the right musicians, it can be done."

More than usual, for this project, the art of casting the right musicians was paramount in achieving those creative dreams. As Maneri notes, "The musicians on this project are of a family of improvisers that can traverse the many styles and textures of music, past, present and future."

Joining the pianist and violist, the list of artists well-known for their versatility and adventurousness includes the rhythm team of drummer Tom Rainey and bassist John Hebert grounding the contributions of flexi-vocalists Jen Shyu and Theo Bleckmann, clarinetist Louis Sclavis and trumpeter Ralph Alessi.

Ban says, "We knew that Ralph Alessi's beautiful trumpet sound and concept will blend greatly with Mat's viola and Louis Sclavis' deep, resonant bass clarinet. Louis is one of the most creative musicians to ever play the bass clarinet, and he also knows the repository of European classical music and how to blend it with the jazz tradition. We knew that John Hebert and Tom Rainey can lock immediately in a groove, that they can swing an atonal line and feed the band a propulsive engine, but also can [lock in with] one of the soloist's instruments. And, this being an opera, we knew that Jen Shyu and Theo Bleckmann can bridge Enescu's lines into a jazz ensemble while bringing their own touch to the written material. Getting the right people for the project was essential for such a mad endeavor of reimagining an opera through jazz and improvisation.

Speaking more broadly about the kindred spirits and adaptability of vernacular Eastern European musical culture, Ban points out that "Eastern European folklore in its purest forms was created by communities devoid of erudition. There's something primordial in it that speaks directly to modern and contemporary avant-garde instincts. It also swings madly and can be tender one moment and visceral the next one.

"Eastern European folklore, as Bartók and Enescu understood, is an endless source of inspiration. What separates it from other folk music in Europe is the fact that it was less influenced by court music, religious music and classical music. It is this unique trait that makes it so appealing to modern and contemporary contexts."

Oedipe Redux counts as a prime contemporary example of Transylvanian culture in action, and in metamorphosing motion."

—Josef Woodard

Cecilie Strange Comes Full Circle

CECILIE STRANGE, THE GIFTED YOUNG Danish saxophonist and composer, first hit DownBeat's radar with *Blue* (April Records), her 2020 debut as leader of her "dream quartet," which set listeners adrift on a tonal soundscape both melancholic and warm. Then came the shimmering music of 2021's *Blikan* (Blue), an old Icelandic word that means to shine or to appear. This year's release of *Beyond* (April Records) continues her journey with meditations on the circle of life written on a remote Norwegian island under the midnight sun.

Simultaneously, Strange has blossomed as the co-leader of KELIIDO with guitarist Anna Roemer, who shares her vision of ambient improvised music. *Elements* (ExoPac) their hauntingly beautiful second album, won the 2023 Carl Prize for Jazz Composition, and they have a new release coming out this fall. Both live in Copenhagen's bohemian enclave of Vesterbro, where Strange and her husband, Viktor Guldagger, an orthopedist, are raising their growing family.

When DownBeat caught up via Zoom, Strange had just returned from a five-week family vacation in Bali. The conversation was enlivened by some delightful pop-in visits by her 3-year-old daughter, Alice.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Cree McCree: "The Alices Of My Life," the lovely opener of *Beyond*, sets the tone for an album that traces the circle of life.

Cecilie Strange: That's the musical journey I'm on. I named my daughter Alice after my late grandmother, who was really important to me and died when I was a child, and it ends with a tribute to my grandfather, who's 95 and still plays golf. And I was carrying my third child when I went to this little island in the northern part of Norway, where I composed all the music.

McCree: Your meditation on that experience, "Midnight Sun Upon Saltværsøya Island," is very evocative. You can almost see the shimmer of light dancing on the sea around you.

Strange: Going there was a huge experience for me. You can apply to go compose on this island, and I was lucky to get that opportunity. It's remote. I needed to take three planes, one ferry and a boat to get there. I was six months pregnant when I went, and there was just one other person living there, the caretaker. But I felt like I needed to go and experience this place, that all this music was about to come out of me.

McCree: The lullaby "Byssan Lull" traces another circle of life. You learned it from your husband, whose mother sang it to him.

Strange: He taught me that lullaby when I was carrying our first child, and I was like, this is beautiful. I got my mother-in-law to write down the lyrics so I could learn to sing it.

McCree: You also dedicated "Where My Heart Lives" to your husband. You two have a powerful bond.

Strange: We really do. We've been together for half my life, we have three children together, and he gives me the most amazing support as a musician, an artist and a composer.

McCree: You've also come full circle with your "dream quartet" with pianist Peter Rosendale, drummer Jacob Heyer and bassist Thommy Andersson, who played on *Blue*, *Blikan* and *Beyond*.

Strange: Yes, in one room, instead of isolating the sound in separate rooms. Josefine Cronhol, our guest vocalist, was also in the circle for *Beyond*, which was amazing. She used to play with Miles, and I remember hearing her for the first time when I was 17. I had this dream that maybe one day I could do some recording with her.

McCree: Another dream that came true is winning the 2023 Carl Prize for Jazz Composition for your visionary improvisations with guitarist Anna Roemer in KELIIDO.

Strange: The prize is named after the Danish composer Carl Nielson, and it's a huge honor. We play free improvised music so at first we were like, can we even be nominated for this? But there's something called instant composing, you compose while you play it.

BYSSAN LULL

Cecilie Strange on Saltværsøya Island, where she composed the music for *Beyond*.

McCree: You and Anna are completely in sync. How did you first get together?

Strange: We went to the same music academy. I was five years ahead of her, but we had an immediate musical understanding, so when I had my big masters composition concert I invited her to play on it. Then we moved to Norway for a few years, and when I got back Anna asked me to play in her masters concert.

So, when we both found ourselves living in Copenhagen at the same time, we decided we wanted to make a project that was free improvised music. We invite new guest musicians to every concert, and every recording session, so that the music is never predictable. Every time we play it is 100% improvised. It's like painting with sound. —*Cree McCree*

Bartz, Blanchard, Myers, Jenkins Named NEA Jazz Masters

Gary Bartz, Terence Blanchard, Amina Claudine Myers and Willard Jenkins have been named the 2024 NEA Jazz Masters Fellows. The honors, awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The honorees each receive an award of $25,000 and will be celebrated with a free concert on April 13, 2024.

"Jazz is one of our nation's most significant artistic contributions to the world, and the NEA is proud to recognize individuals whose creativity and dedication ensure that the art form continues to evolve and inspire," said Maria Rosario Jackson, NEA chair.

Gary Bartz, a purveyor of informal composition, has been one of the leading alto saxophonists on the scene since the 1960s, working with the likes of Max Roach, Charles Mingus, Art Blakey and Miles Davis. He has released more than 45 albums as a leader and appeared on more than 200 as a guest artist or sideman.

Terence Blanchard, a seven-time Grammy winner, has been a force for more than 40 years. An alumnus of Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers, Blanchard went on to write film scores, most famously for Spike Lee, as well as tour and perform with his own groups and as a sideman.

Amina Claudine Myers has honed her craft as a composer for voice and instruments. From her beginnings as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, she moved to New York City in the 1970s, giving her compositional work priority.

Willard Jenkins, recipient of the A.B. Spellman NEA Jazz Masters Fellowship for Jazz Advocacy, has been involved in jazz as a writer, broadcaster, educator, historian, artistic director and arts consultant since the 1970s. He is currently the artistic director of the DC Jazz Festival and host of the *Ancient/Future* program on DC's WPFW radio station.

"Gary Bartz's saxophone has blazed trails with his dynamic phraseology and iconic tone for decades — he is representative for the truth in music," said Jason Moran, Kennedy Center artistic director for jazz. "Terence Blanchard does it all, from the trumpet to the screen with a singular genius. Amina Claudine Myers has devoted endless time and energy to creating a new canon in the AACM, and when she's at the keys, soul pours freely from her voice and fingers. And, Willard Jenkins has wielded his pen to be a passionate amplifier for the music and the musician." **DB**

"I want to work with good people," says Motéma founder Jana Herzen, which has led the label to sign and promote a host of major jazz stars during its 20 years of existence.

Jana Herzen Reflects on Motéma at 20

A LOT HAS CHANGED AT MOTÉMA MUSIC in 20 years, but as founder, president and A&R director Jana Herzen will tell you, the label's three criteria for signing artists hasn't changed one bit. First, a potential signee should be a master at their craft, or on their way to being one. Second, as a live performer, they need to be able to "change the molecules in the room," per Herzen. And ultimately their work should reflect a desire to "make a positive difference in the world."

"I want to work with good people," Herzen says, her matter-of-fact shrug all but audible on a call from her home office in San Francisco.

Nowhere in those tenets will you find the boundaries of genre. What started as an unboxable label working broadly in "world music" has earned its reputation as a jazz juggernaut, releasing albums by Terri Lyne Carrington and Social Science, Gregory Porter, Geri Allen, René Marie, Monty Alexander, Melissa Aldana and Arturo O'Farrill. Bassist Charnett Moffett was also a Motéma signee, becoming partners with Herzen in music and life until he passed away last year.

"I was never limiting it to jazz, but we got a reputation as a jazz label," Herzen says.

When the singer and guitarist looked to release her own music around the turn of the millennium, she found a record industry on shaky ground — and few labels willing to take a risk on a singer-songwriter from an unconventional background. "I was being told, 'The music sounds great, but we can't do anything right now.' I got enough of those that I thought, 'Well, I guess I'll start my own label to put it out.'"

With guidance from industry vets, Herzen founded Motéma in San Francisco. The name nods to its culturally roving mission: "motéma" means "heart" in Lingala, the Bantu language spoken in much of the Congo region, just as Herzen's surname is the plural for the German word for "heart." The label unveiled Herzen's debut *Soup's On Fire* in 2001, then released percussionist Babatunde Lea's *Soul Pools* in 2003.

Through Lea, Herzen would be introduced to Moffett after Herzen had moved the label to New York. Their business relationship eventually deepened into a creative partnership, and then a romance, which led to the label's inadvertent return to San Francisco. The sudden onset of the pandemic, and grim positivity rates back in New York, ultimately kept the pair in California.

"As shocking as it was, with so many people dying, having now lost Charnett, I actually think of those times fondly: We had a chance to be together a lot and make music. That really was a blessing," Herzen says.

Moffett's death from a heart attack last April has left Herzen struggling to imagine her life — and Motéma — without him. The label took a 16-month hiatus from new releases, but now, as Motéma breaks its silence in time for the 20th anniversary, Moffett is the beating heart of its return. *Innocence Of Truth*, a duo recording he made with Herzen, comes out Oct. 20, with more material to follow.

"It's a heartbreak for me because he was very loved as a sideman and made records as a leader all through his life. But he raised two kids, and the whole financial responsibility thing led him to rely a lot on income from being a sideman," Herzen says. "By the time he got to Motéma, most of his focus was really on his own material, and it was a career we were enjoying developing."

Also due out are *Rising Sun* (Sept. 15), the debut by 25-year-old pianist-composer Shuteen Erdenebaatar; and *A Lovesome Thing* (Nov. 24), Geri Allen and Kurt Rosenwinkel's live album recorded at Jazz à la Villette in 2012. Already released as part of the celebration is *Flamenkora*, a collision of West African Mande music, flamenco and Western jazz spearheaded by Motéma signee Volker Goetze. —*Hannah Edgar*

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KRIS Davis

OF RESISTANCE & FLIGHT

BY JOHN MURPH
PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDOK

In late May 2022, Kris Davis realized a dream. She and her ensemble Diatom Ribbons performed six nights at New York's Village Vanguard — the world's most famous jazz venue.

The pianist, composer and bandleader originally had booked the date for April 2020, but like so many other concerts during that time, hers was canceled because of the pandemic.

In January 2021, Davis did perform at the Vanguard with drummer Eric McPherson and bassist Stephan Crump, collectively known as the Borderlands Trio. That concert gave Davis a phantasmagorical experience in getting acquainted with the club's acoustics.

"It was sort of freaky because I've heard all these pianists perform at the Vanguard on albums, and suddenly I hear that sound coming back at me while I'm

CAROLINE MARDOK

Kris Davis Diatom Rhythms, right to left, Val Jeanty, Julian Lage, Trevor Dunn, Terri Lyne Carrington and Davis.

playing," Davis says from her Boston home in late June, just one day away from joining Dave Holland on a European tour.

For sure, many pianists, ranging from such towering icons as Bill Evans, Bobby Timmons, McCoy Tyner and Thelonious Monk to such eminent modernists as Brad Mehldau, Uri Caine, Jason Moran, Chucho Valdés, Geri Allen and Junko Onishi have documented their stints at the Village Vanguard. And some of those albums have become part of the pantheon of best live albums in jazz history. Davis adds her scintillating new double-disc, *Kris Davis' Diatom Ribbons Live At The Village Vanguard* (Pyroclastic Records), to that distinguished legacy.

Davis' entry into the esteemed class of musicians who have chronicled their time at the Vanguard as a leader comes when her ascension in the jazz ecosystem continues to soar. Earlier this year, she became one of the first three women to win a Grammy Award for Best Jazz Instrumental Album for her contributions on *New Standards Vol. 1* (Candid Records), a project produced by Terri Lyne Carrington.

Last year, DownBeat named her Pianist of the Year in its Critics Poll. A year prior to that, she received a $275,000 Doris Duke Artist Award. And in 2020, the Jazz Journalists Association named Davis both pianist and composer of the year. Since moving to New York from Toronto in the early aughts, the 43-year-old Davis has released 24 albums as a leader and co-leader, a few of which were issued on her own imprint, Pyroclastic Records.

The first Diatom Ribbons album came out in 2019. It featured a larger cast that included saxophonist JD Allen, singer and bassist esperanza splading, vibraphonist Ches Smith and guitarists Nels Cline and Marc Ribot.

For the Vanguard dates, Davis retained drummer Carrington, bassist Trevor Dunn and turntablist/sound sculptor Val Jeanty from the group's 2019 album lineup while adding guitarist Julian Lage.

"One thing that is very cool about this group is that Kris, Val and Terri have been performing as an autonomous trio for some time, so there is a built-in core to the larger group," Dunn says. "That makes for a certain flexibility in the configuration. Sometimes we play as a quartet; other times she might add a saxophone player, or in the case of the Vanguard record, Julian Lage. This, of course, affects the arrangements of the songs, not to mention, Kris is always coming up with new ways to approach the material."

Spirits Up Above

Going back to the "room" sound of the Vanguard, Davis reflects on the experience of playing the piano while weighing in on the history of so many others who have performed there. Negotiating the sonic memories imprinted in the room affected some of her in-the-moment musical decisions.

"It was sort of spooky: It's like having someone, who's really accomplished, sit in the audience and listen to you play," she explains, before noting that she had to put away such potentially self-sabotaging thoughts. "We had to just concentrate on what we do and stay in the moment."

For Jeanty, the Vanguard reminds her of those cozy basement parties where DJs often spin. She started playing there in the mid-aughts. "It feels like a bar gig," Jeanty says. "But there is so much creative energy in that space because of all of those legends, who've played there before."

Lage, Diatom Ribbons newcomer, loves the room from a guitarist's perspective. He says that it rounds out some of the edges of electric guitar and softens the attack. "For guitarists, it's very forgiving," he says. "There are no parallel walls in that room, so the sound functions differently than about every other space that you'll ever play with low ceilings. The room has a lot of features that make a [concert] sound like a [studio] record."

In turn, Dunn says that the Vanguard is "one of the driest, most unforgiving rooms" he's ever performed in. "I can really only describe the sound as clear and direct," Dunn says. "Somehow the room itself doesn't interfere with the sound, which can be a positive or negative thing, depending on your perspective. For example, low subs are not amplified by a hollow stage, which is something I like in bigger rooms. As a bass player, typically positioned between the piano and drums, I have the most ideal sound in the room. At the Vanguard, it almost feels like there is an acoustic limiter happening naturally — you can't play too loud in there; it's not possible. Every time I've played there, I've definitely had to adjust my approach to the room. At the Vanguard there is a certain pristine quality to the sound that puts everyone under the microscope."

Indeed, it took the ensemble some time to get

its footing while striking a balance between acoustic and electric instrumentation. "You have to just live through all these sonic explorations that always go on at the Vanguard," Dunn says. "Part of the beauty of that club is that you're playing 12 sets over six nights. So, the invitation to go deeper into those [sonic] inquiries is far greater than when you're playing in another room for just one night."

Jeanty felt the challenge of the close proximity among the musicians on the small stage, especially when it came to setting up her arsenal of equipment (including a Vestax VCI-400 controller, a Roland HandSonic digital drum and a Korg Kaossilator Pro Plus). She also brought a small monitoring speaker so that she could better hear sonic collages.

"The first couple of nights, we had to adjust to all the different sounds within the band for that room," Jeanty recalls. "The first night felt a little weird. Sometimes I would make a sound but couldn't hear it. Other times, I would trigger a sound that was too loud. But I could feel a progression. By the third or fourth night, it was on point. It was fiyah!"

Flying Through Resistance

Diatom Ribbons Live At The Village Vanguard begins with the band's lurking treatment of "Alice In The Congo," a snarling harmolodic-inspired composition by drummer Roland Shannon Jackson. At the Vanguard, Dunn fattens the bottom with a lubricous undulating pulse on which Carrington helps propel with an intricate, almost New Orleans second-line groove. In between, Lage and Davis unravel crisscrossing improvisations that tighten as the rhythm section liberates from timekeeping duties and gets more involved in the collective improvisation while Jeanty joins the foil through her silvery textures.

Davis engaged in a heavy investigation of Jackson's Decoding Society albums when she worked with David Breskin, who produced Jackson's 1982 LP, *Man Dance* (Antilles), which closes with "Alice In The Congo." Breskin had commissioned Davis and fellow pianist, Craig Taborn — collectively billed as Octopus — for a February 2022 concert at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth honoring Jackson. In addition to commissioning Davis and Taborn to compose two new pieces, each based upon sculptures, they performed piano-duet interpretations of "Alice In The Congo" and Jackson's "Apache Love Cry."

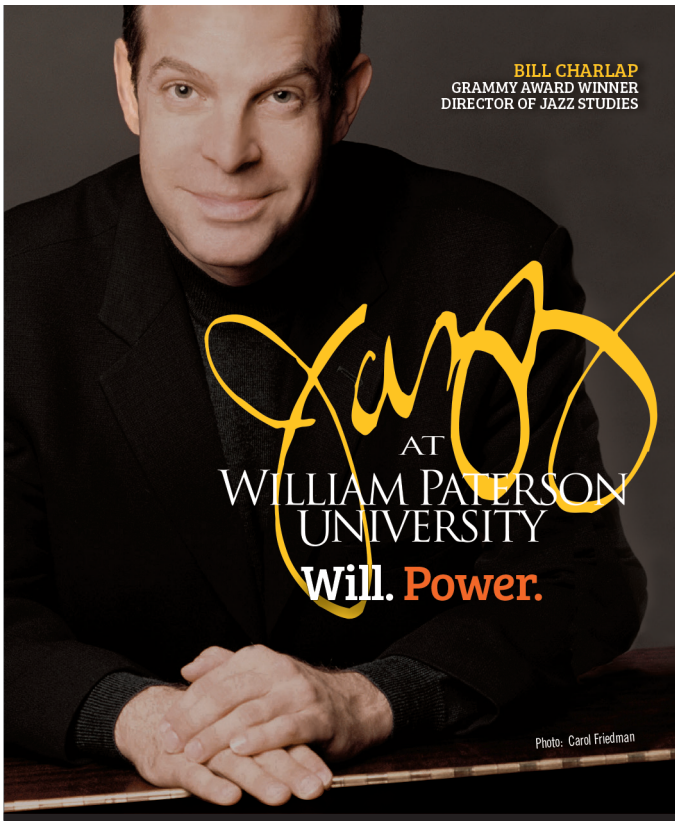
"After that [Modern Art of Museum of Fort Worth] concert, I thought 'Alice In The Congo' would sound cool in Diatom Ribbons," Davis remembers before mentioning that she was listening to Jackson's Decoding Society LPs before she recorded her first Diatom Ribbons album. "I like the groove element and the repetition element of their music, but I also like the freedom that he brings to it. I do not know if it is through his instruction or just how the musicians approached it, but there is the grounding and freedom in his music that really speaks to me."

Later on *Live At The Village Vanguard*, Diatom Ribbons delivers two mesmerizing makeovers of Wayne Shorter's "Dolores," which was first recorded by Miles Davis' iconic mid-'60s quintet. In concert, Davis articulates the quizzical melody across Carrington's shuffling momentum and Dunn's molten bass line. As the composition progresses, Davis embroiders a stunning improvisation that stretches from the post-bop vocabulary to the thundering, dissonant edges reminiscent of Don Pullen. Eventually Lage interjects then engages Davis in some knotty cross dialogue.

Davis says that when she first started getting into jazz while growing up in the suburbs of Calgary, Canada, Miles' mid-'60s albums featuring Shorter played a crucial role in her falling more deeply in love with the music. Decades later, she got a chance to work with him during the pandemic while he taught some of her students — via Zoom — at the Berklee College of Music's Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice.

"[Shorter] has so many great one-liners that really rang true to me, and I reference them often," Davis says. "One of my favorite ones was, 'A plane needs resistance to fly.' Man, that is so deep."

Davis also pays homage to Geri Allen with the inclusion of her composition, "The Dancer," which first appeared on Allen' 1987 album *Open On*



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Davis as a fierce collaborator: 1. On tour with the Dave Holland New Quartet, from left, Davis, Holland, Jaleel Shaw and Nasheet Waits. 3. As a member of Trefoil with, from left, Gerald Cleaver, Ambrose Akinmusire and Davis. 3. At the Grammy Awards as member of Terri Lyne Carrington's *New Standards Vol. 1* album, which won the Grammy for Best Jazz Instrumental Album. From left, Linda May Han Oh, Davis, Carrington, Nicolas Payton and Matthew Stevens. 4. Davis with Craig Taborn, her Octopus duo partner.

All Sides In The Middle (Minor Music). Diatom Ribbons' version eschews Allen's rambunctious avant-funk arrangement from the mid-'80s in favor of a more laidback, bluesier approach, marked by Davis' plucking of the piano strings and tweaking of the Arturia microfreak synth, Lage's languid guitar lines, Jeanty's sandpapery textures and the rhythm section's loping gait.

Davis says that she'd seen Allen play multiple times, but only met her once. Nevertheless, through several tribute concerts and commissions, Davis has explored Allen's multifaceted oeuvre since her passing in 2017. When Carrington invited Davis to play at a few tribute concerts for Allen, she said that she was mostly familiar with Allen's 1991 album, *The Nurturer* (Blue Note/Somethin' Else). Eventually, Davis dug deeper and delved into Allen's earlier repertoire such as 1984's *The Printmakers* and 1985's *Homegrown* (both on Minor Music).

Ghosts in the Machine

The rest of the Vanguard program consists of Davis' suspenseful originals. Her probing "Nine Hats" almost follows Allen's noteworthy investigations into Eric Dolphy's music. It references Dolphy's mid-'60s Thelonious Monk tribute, "Hat And Beard." Davis' composition also incorporates elements of Conlon Nancarrow's Study No. 9 for Player Piano.

At the Vanguard, Davis maps out the swirling pointillistic melody on the synthesizer atop Lage's lulling four-note ostinato. As she explores the inner mechanics of the acoustic piano. Dunn strums eerie acro touches on acoustic bass while Carrington and Jeanty add more intriguing colors and textures.

"Nancarrow has always been a real inspiration for me through those player piano pieces," Davis explains. "I wanted to incorporate some of his language with Eric Dolphy's 'Hat And Beard.' I just sequenced that line from 'Hat And Beard' in the synthesizer and used those little pieces of DNA to create an improvised piece."

Lage's four-note ostinato on "Nine Hats" can be detected on the conclusion of Diatom Ribbon's treatment of "Alice In The Congo." "I consider that [ostinato] the wallpaper of ['Nine Hats']," Davis says. "He was instructed not to move from that and just be this thing shimmering in the back. Then the rest of us created a soundscape around those little pieces of DNA."

Other intrepid originals include the almost punkish "Kingfisher" — the first of the three-part suite "Bird Calls" commemorating Charlie Parker's centennial in 2020 — on which she sublimely incorporates Olivier Messiaen's mode three from his "modes of limited transposition."

The episodic "Kingfisher," however, does not sound like conventional modal jazz. Instead, it sounds like the soundtrack to a meta gaming platform. "The song is based on this idea of threes," Davis says. "There is the three-bar cycle with the bass line happening on which a solo occurs. Then there are three sections within the bigger piece where we have that groove bass line thing, a halftime groove freak-out and then a free section. 'Kingfisher' incorporates this idea of jumping cuts between sections."

Messiaen's influence also manifests in the evocative second part of the suite, "Bird Call Blues," a capricious original that wouldn't sound out of place on one of Art of Noise's seminal '80s albums thanks to Jeanty's virtuosic turntablism and sonic manipulations of voiceovers from Messiaen and Paul Bley. Diatom Ribbons also utilizes voiceover samples of Sun Ra from a 1991 radio interview on the protean "VW" and Karlheinz Stockhausen from a 1972 lecture on the riveting third part of the suite, "Parasitic Hunter."

"Val is the X factor for me," says Davis, before revealing that prior to them working together that she had not written or played with a turntablist. "When we first improvised, she was using her banks of sounds and audio clippings of interviews. As we got further into the process of the [2019] album, I thought it would be really nice to

bring in some clips of interviews of people that I really respect. Cecil Taylor had just passed away, and I was looking for a way to pay tribute with a different approach to paying tribute to him."

"I just stared digging around and finding language that Val could use that felt personal to me in the music," Davis continues. "Then she could manipulate in any way that she felt would work. I like to give her some sonic tools, but then tell her that she can do whatever with them."

Jeanty says that Davis provided charts for all of the compositions. On some songs, Davis notated specific voices in sections. "But Kris doesn't say that it has to come on the fourth bar or something like that," Jeanty explains. "We let the samples flow into the music naturally. We have a trust. There are specific instructions in other places where she will notate that certain sounds need to occur in the intro. For instance, on 'Bird Call Blues,' Davis specified that she wanted the song to begin with samples of bird's chirping. But it was up to me on how I wanted to scratch with those sounds."

Groove Allegiance

Davis formed Diatom Ribbons to channel her love for groove-based music. She said that her compositions from prior albums before the ensemble's 2019 outing lacked a strong foundational groove. But before Diatom Ribbons was established, Davis began working with Carrington and Jeanty. Carrington told Davis that she was attracted to her strong sense of rhythm combined with her strong sense of freedom.

"It was exactly what I was looking for some years back when we first connected," Carrington says. "[Kris] is a beast of a player with incredible technique, but most importantly to me is the sound she gets out of the piano. And she's always looking for windows for ways out. The expansion in harmony from the written material of the compositions allows expansion in rhythm. They go hand in hand. I love playing with her because I don't feel trapped."

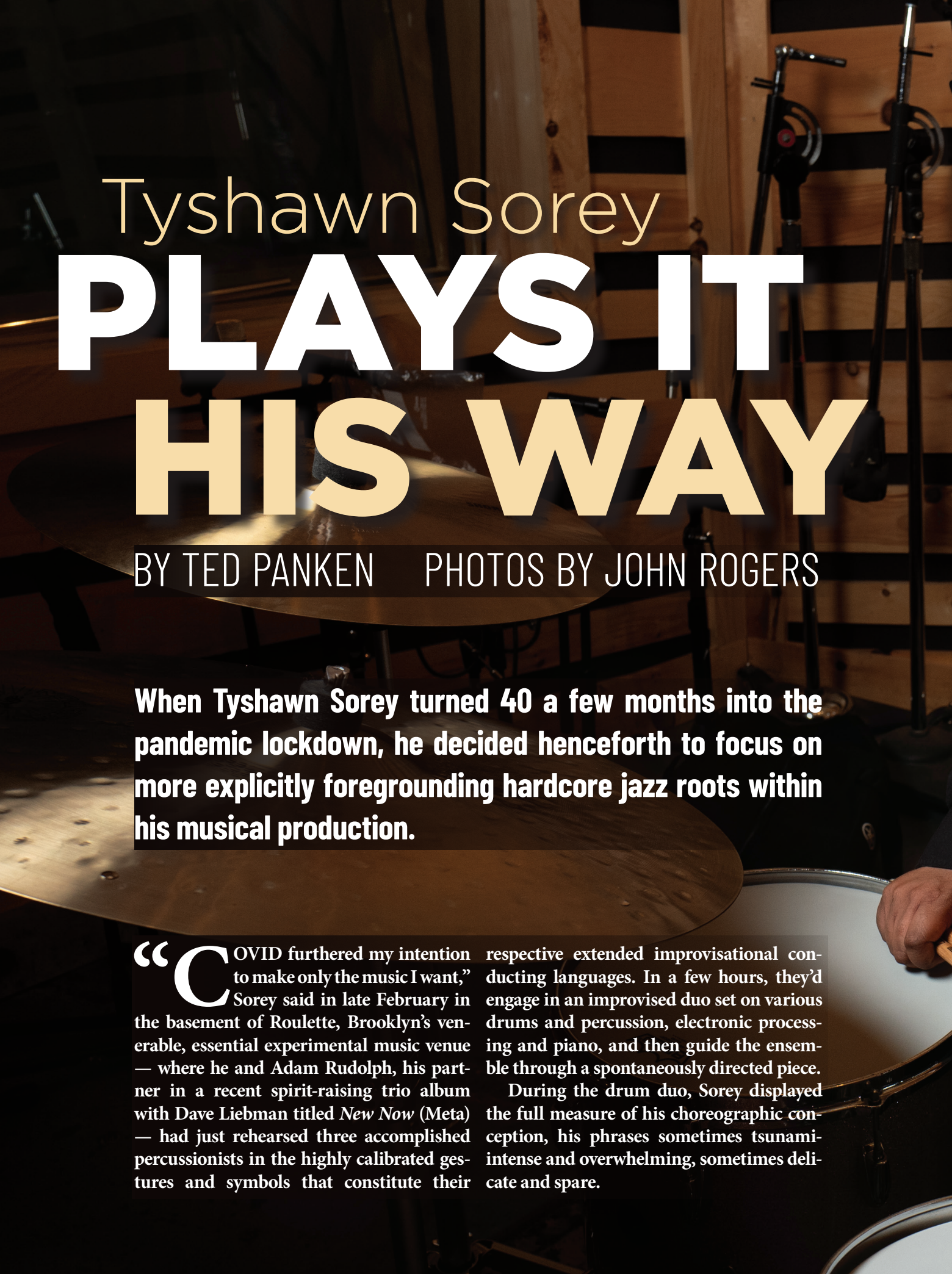
In turn, Davis praises Carrington for her improvisational acumen and keen listening skills. The pianist also agrees that the two have a strong rhythmic connection. "I love playing improvised music with drummers who have a real sense of groove as well as time and rhythm, because then I can get more into the exploratory state. Sometimes, when I play with drummers that are more color-oriented, who never go into a groove or even provide colors through rhythm, something is lost for me."

In describing Davis' compositions for Diatom Ribbons, Carrington notes that they are not freeform in spite of their capacious sound. "They are extremely intricate and most of them are notated profusely so you have to be a good reader," Carrington explains. "The challenge with her music is to play the written material and make them sound free. When people see a lot of notes on paper, they often see it as confinement, but with her music it all makes such beautiful sense."

Lage says Davis' compositions are a great invitation for guitarists in how they deal with frequencies and a wide sonic spectrum. "She designs these pieces where you really can't go wrong," he says. "As a guitarist, it never feels like, 'Oh, God, if I don't do the right thing, I'm not going to fit in.' A true hallmark of her music is that it transcends instrumentation."

"Kris' music has everything — vamps, openness, changes, melodies," Dunn adds. "There are dense harmonies as well as sparse ones that give way to interpretation. As a bassist, every tune is a new adventure. I jump back and forth between upright and electric basses, swinging over changes or holding down atonal ostinatos. In many ways it is the ideal band for me."

"The thing that came to me through the Vanguard concerts as well as from the first Diatom Ribbons album is Wayne's idea about needing resistance to fly," Davis says. "There is something about writing tunes that are more tonal that gives me the space to be more exploratory in terms of my musical language and intervallic approach as an improviser. It also allows me to use more atonal language to create that resistance to fly." DB



Tyshawn Sorey PLAYS IT HIS WAY

BY TED PANKEN PHOTOS BY JOHN ROGERS

When Tyshawn Sorey turned 40 a few months into the pandemic lockdown, he decided henceforth to focus on more explicitly foregrounding hardcore jazz roots within his musical production.

"COVID furthered my intention to make only the music I want," Sorey said in late February in the basement of Roulette, Brooklyn's venerable, essential experimental music venue — where he and Adam Rudolph, his partner in a recent spirit-raising trio album with Dave Liebman titled *New Now* (Meta) — had just rehearsed three accomplished percussionists in the highly calibrated gestures and symbols that constitute their respective extended improvisational conducting languages. In a few hours, they'd engage in an improvised duo set on various drums and percussion, electronic processing and piano, and then guide the ensemble through a spontaneously directed piece.

During the drum duo, Sorey displayed the full measure of his choreographic conception, his phrases sometimes tsunami-intense and overwhelming, sometimes delicate and spare.

The Tyshawn Sorey Trio, from left, Aaron Diehl, Sorey and Matt Brewer.

His commanding execution of abstract, structurally cogent improvisational ideas conceived in service of the music earned him first-call stature during the '00s through the '10s with forward-thinking bandleaders like Butch Morris, Steve Coleman, Muhal Richard Abrams, Vijay Iyer, Dave Douglas, Henry Threadgill, Steve Lehman, Michelle Rosewoman, Myra Melford, Kris Davis and Ingrid Laubrock. Meanwhile, Sorey was presenting his beyond-category, transidiomatic compositions (as well as his skills on trombone and piano) on a series of recordings — *That/Not* (2007), *Oblique–I* (2011), *Alloy* (2014), *The Inner Spectrum Of Variables* (2016), *Verisimilitude* (2017), *Pillars* (2018) and *Unfiltered* (2020) — that spanned Anton Webern-esque spikiness, Morton Feldman-esque stillness, exhilarating outcat jazz, AACM-descended soundscapes and card pieces and collective improvisations.

During the '10s, Sorey earned a doctorate of musical arts in composition from Columbia University, a MacArthur "Genius" Grant and, in 2018, a tenure-track assistant professorship at University of Pennsylvania. He concomitantly broadened his scope, composing fully notated and improvisationally oriented works for orchestras of various sizes. In the process, Sorey, raised in a Black working-class neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, became a celebrated, widely reviewed figure in highbrow contemporary music circles, even the subject of a 6,000-word profile in the New York Times Magazine.

"I'd been paid for two years of premieres that still had to be completed for performance," Sorey said of his July 2020 mindset. "Who knew what would happen?" Whatever the case, Sorey was determined to establish "a situation where I'm playing jazz standards — or jazz, period. Even though I've been known to do that extremely well, I haven't gotten calls to do it. I won't sit and cry by the phone, waiting for it to ring. I'll produce my own projects where I do that, I'll do it my way, and I'll do it well."

The spring 2023 release *Continuing* (Pi) is the final album of a trilogy documenting Sorey's pursuit of that endeavor in conjunction with pianist Aaron Diehl, another distinguished pan-genre practitioner interested in connecting the languages of jazz and the Euro canon. As on the 2022 releases *Mesmerism* (Yeros7 Music) and *The Off-Off Broadway Guide To Synergism* (Pi), Sorey showcases his profound connection to the jazz timeline and his deep connection to the drummers who've fueled it. In the process, he upholds both the tropes of mobility ("keep them guessing") and individualism ("that's Tyshawn Sorey") that have defined each step of his musical journey.

On *Mesmerism* and *Continuing*, Sorey, Diehl and bassist Matt Brewer function as a standalone trio, exploring deep cuts by Horace Silver, Ahmad Jamal, Wayne Shorter and Harold Mabern as well as songbook chestnuts like "Detour Ahead," "Autumn Leaves" and "Angel Eyes." Russell Hall plays bass on *The Off-Off Broadway Guide To Synergism*, a triple CD culled from a five-night run at the Jazz Gallery led by protean alto saxophonist Greg Osby, with whom the trio functions as an exuberantly freewheeling, interactive rhythm section. It dropped in late 2022, contiguous to a much-lauded, sold-out run of Sorey's multidisciplinary Mark Rothko tribute *Monochromatic Light* (Afterlife) at Park Avenue Armory, directed by Peter Sellars.

On the surface, Sorey and Diehl might seem an oil and water matchup. Now 37, Diehl toured with the Wynton Marsalis Septet directly after graduating high school. On three Mack Avenue albums, he interrogates ragtime and stride piano, bebop, the blues and the classical orientation of John Lewis and Roland Hanna on their own terms of engagement, showcasing his thorough, individualistic assimilation of Marsalis' "all jazz is modern" mantra. Diehl has also sustained a flourishing career concertizing on repertoire spanning Philip Glass to Prokofiev to Gershwin.

In late 2017, Diehl heard Sorey play drums with pianist Vicky Chow, a respected contemporary classical specialist, in a concert of John Zorn's music. Not long thereafter, he sent Sorey a complimentary note on Instagram. Dialogue ensued. In the spring of 2020, Diehl publicly interviewed Sorey (via Zoom) for the Phillips Collection.

"Tyshawn's wide palette of musical knowledge, interests and understanding fascinated me," Diehl said. "People use the phrase 'blurring the lines' between musical disciplines, but he's really been doing that, synthesizing all his influences into his own compositional output in fascinating ways. He's brilliant, and I wanted to get to know him."

Sorey's feelings were reciprocal, but he was concerned Diehl might consider him too "out." Eventually, he recalled, "I mustered the cour-

age to ask Aaron to play. Without hesitation, he said he'd be down to do something." In May 2021, they entered Brooklyn's Bunker studio for a maiden voyage. "I wanted to create an environment where Aaron was comfortable but also have my aesthetics in the air, if not necessarily in the forefront. Aaron likes to be super-prepared; I wanted to go into the studio and develop it there to get the freshest possible result."

He sent a song-list, and called a rehearsal at Diehl's apartment the day before the session, sticking the drum parts on Diehl's couch. "I thought Tyshawn would have written arrangements, but he thought up roadmaps that he dictated after we ran down the tunes," Diehl recalled. He consulted his iPhone for the notes he'd scribbled as Sorey broke down "Detour Ahead." "Measures 11 to 12 half-time; we vamp those measures. Bridge, half-time melody, omit last 8, straight to bass solo. Bass solo, top of form in normal time. Two choruses. Truncate last bar of last 8. Piano solo, first chorus, play in A major except modulate to D-flat major."

"I came up with this arrangement instantaneously, inspired by Matt's and Aaron's playing through the song," Sorey explained. "I've listened to Bill Evans' timeless, classic interpretation countless times since high school. I approached 'Autumn Leaves' the same way, thinking about rhythm and melody operating within different forms of time — half-time or double-time or a third of the time — which happens before we get to the solos, which are played over the regular form."

"Before the rehearsal, Aaron sent me a voicemail where he played piano on Paul Motian's 'From Time To Time' and then hung up. At rehearsal, I told him, 'This is exactly how I thought this arrangement would go.' At the studio, after we heard back the first take of 'Enchantment,' the opening song, I said, 'I told you.' We'd never played a single note together, and there was initially some nervous energy. But then it was as though we'd been playing together for a decade."

Mesmerism also features Muhal Richard Abrams' "Two Over One," which Sorey knew both from *Sight Song*, Abrams' 1977 duo recital with Malachi Favors, and from Greg Osby's *Zero*, which, he says, "blew my mind" as an undergraduate at William Paterson College. "I'd been playing in school ensembles and jam sessions that didn't push the envelope, and the harmonic sophistication and ensemble interplay made this exactly the music I was hearing in my head," Sorey said. "I'd wanted to play with Greg ever since."

Fortuitously, Osby invited Sorey's trio to join him at DROM, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. "We loved it," Sorey said. "Aaron has incredible ears; he was able to adjust quickly. We'd been constantly communicating about music, almost every day, and I'd been pointing him to Greg's records and AACM stuff. I already knew Greg's music inside-out — his experiences in Special Edition with Jack DeJohnette, who's one of my biggest heroes, how he worked with virtuosos like Eric Harland and Rodney Green, how artful and chance-taking his rhythm sections were."

Osby met Sorey in 2008 when supervising saxophonist Meilana Gillard's *Day One* for his Inner Circle imprint. "Tyshawn's approach was completely different than a lot of drummers in his generation," Osby said. "I found him totally complementary and welcoming. He didn't call unnecessary attention to himself. He plays with a large kit, an array of cymbals and various sticks, mallets and hybrid brushes that he switches in the middle of songs to get different colors. It's a wash of sound, as though he's playing timpani, glockenspiel, marimba, vibraphone, the whole percussion ensemble of an orchestra in one kit, giving you this wealth of possibility. He might do a whole song playing with his hands. He's spontaneous in the moment, propulsive, without stepping on the

"He was largely responsible for my growth," Sorey said of pianist Harold Mabern, an elder statesman who mentored the young drummer-composer-producer.

soloist's feet. He's a thinking, very studied musician. His perspective aligns with experimentation, working things out, trimming the fat and accentuating things that often are diminished. I consider him a composer first."

The quartet reconvened at the Jazz Gallery in March 2022, relying on their collective knowledge to flow seamlessly from one song to another, as Osby had done on the 1998 Sweet Basil gig captured on *Banned In New York*, another Sorey lodestar. "I wanted to play things we could internalize and get to the core of without a lot of reading," Osby said. "I told them, 'If I use some of these songs as an interlude and launch pad to go into something, listen to me — don't get into your own thing.' I wanted to sound very free and compositional, as if we were writing these songs on the fly."

"I've had my years of producing long CDs and long works and long processes," Sorey said after the Roulette concert, from his home near Philadelphia. "*Mesmerism* let me get away from that. Nobody has time to listen to so much." The four tracks on *Continuing*, recorded last December, are much longer, culled from Sorey's original 10-tune song list. "I thought we'd record all the tunes and still have a short CD," Sorey said. "But when we finished 'Angel Eyes,' I said, 'Let's go home.' We'd played so much music, we didn't need to do more."

As signified by a photo in the CD package, Sorey conceived *Continuing* as a tribute to the late pianist Harold Mabern, a crucial mentor at William Paterson. The session ends with a spare yet relentlessly funky rendering of Mabern's "In What Direction Are You Headed?" from Lee Morgan's final studio album.

"He was largely responsible for my growth, not only as a musician but as a person," Sorey said. "Sometimes after school I'd ride the bus with him to Manhattan, and he'd talk about players who inspired him and different people I should be listening to — and also a lot of tunes! In 2015, he came to the Village Vanguard to hear my trio with Corey Smythe and Chris Tordini play music from *Alloys* and part of *Verisimilitude*. I thought he'd hate it because it's so far from the music he was into. But to my surprise, he was super-encouraging. It made me emotional. He said: 'I'm so proud of you, to see how far you've come in this music, and your knowledge of so-called traditional things. Keep doing what you're doing.'"

On *Continuing*, the trio honors Mabern's exhortation. On extended treatments of Ahmad Jamal's "Seleritis," which transpires to a hallucinatory slow-drag "Poinciana" groove, and the noir ballad "Angel Eyes," addressed molasses-slow, the players develop the narrative arc with extreme patience and deliberation that evokes the stillness and incrementalism of Feldman's sound world. Each holds up their end with independent yet synchronous ideas, eschewing call-and-response, in line with the aesthetics of mentors like Roscoe Mitchell and Butch Morris.

Does Sorey's roadmapping on the trio albums mirror the extended improvisation system (he calls it Autoschediasms, after the ancient Greek word for "to extemporize"), inspired by Morris' conduction process and Anthony Braxton's Language Musics, that he deployed on the Roulette concert?

"Yes, in the context of working with notated musical materials," Sorey responded. A more elaborate Autoschediasm experience occupies the second disk of the 2021 release *For George Lewis/Autoschediasms* (Cantaloupe), on which Sorey guides Alarm Will Sound, the esteemed 20-member chamber orchestra, through two precise, kaleidoscopic 25-minute journeys, one of them recorded on video chat.

"For George Lewis" is one of several "tone parallels" (Duke Ellington's term) by Sorey that embody the essences of personal heroes. In a four-minute YouTube clip of *For Roscoe Mitchell*, cellist Seth Parker Woods methodically cycles a rubato phrase as the Seattle Symphony Orchestra plays in the lower register of their instruments.

"I'm dealing with my compositional aesthetics: breathing, letting sound be itself, a strict harmonic approach," Sorey said. "But I'm also recalling my performance experiences with Roscoe's interest in extremes, like circular-breathing for five minutes on sopranino saxophone. The piece begins with Seth very high on the fingerboard. He has to repeat one single note with a good sound for a long time. The physicality of doing that on the cello, without exhaustion, interested me."

Extreme imperatives also animate *Adagio (For Wadada Leo Smith)*, an alto saxophone concerto performed in March by Tim McAllister with the Atlanta Symphony. "The piece is full of long alto saxophone lines where the saxophonist doesn't breathe for as much as 30 seconds. It's more about preparing for how much breath to take in before you play than the actual breathing. That comes from high school, when I played long tones on trombone, working on getting a big sound, no matter what dynamic level. I wanted to get an orchestra gig and play classical music."

"For George Lewis" signifies on Lewis' "The Will To Adornment," which Sorey witnessed at its 2011 premiere. "George and Butch Morris are two of the most important people in my life," Sorey said, noting that when Lewis first heard him in Italy in 2003 with Morris' conduction ensemble, he immediately dubbed him "a future co-conspirator."

"That piece brought me closest to what I was looking for in my own compositional practice. Each player has to be aware of their relationship to the others, or they'll be completely lost in the chaotic sound world that George established. Much of it deals with non-traditional ways to play an instrument — violin glissandos, growls on the trombone and brass, multiphonics on the woodwinds, double-stops on the strings.

"Near the end, a jazz-like melodic soundscape emerges from this soundscape. The harmonies slowly shift back and forth and the meters are changing, which destabilizes the ensemble so you won't notice a particular pulse. The music evokes a joyful, busy energy. I wanted to explore those ideas, express that joy, but with my own aesthetic, in a meditative space, also reflecting trauma and grief."

A hands-on mentor to Sorey as he pursued his degree at Columbia, Lewis described the dropped-jaw quality he can elicit among even

his most accomplished peers. "I remember performing with Tyshawn and John Zorn at the old Stone, and thinking that what he was doing — coming up with very meaningful tiny sounds that he knew just where to place — was amazing," Lewis said. "I was trying to write a lot of percussion music, and realized he knew a lot about it. I thought about how I could learn to do some of the ideas he was doing. He was very generous with his time and attention."

Lewis' own tone parallel to Sorey is "Calder" (2015), "a mobile piece" for trombones, piano and percussion, which "Tyshawn plays equally well." The musicians, guided by cards containing different instructions, move from place to place on a large stage covered with percussion instruments where they play their impression of the card.

"Tyshawn knows a lot of different traditions of music-making," Lewis said, before recalling a Vijay Iyer Trio concert with Sorey and Linda May Han Oh in February. "At a certain point they played something that sounded like Roscoe Mitchell's 'Nonaah.' The concept sounded like it sprang forth from Vijay's head, like Athena springing forth from the head of Zeus — and Tyshawn was right there. Their encore was 'Night And Day' in 7/4 with a bridge that sounded like 'Giant Steps.'

"Tyshawn does these things easily or effortlessly. When I say 'effortlessly,' I don't mean without thinking. You hear an incisive intelligence in whatever he's doing, a logic built up over time that you follow. It always surprises you. It's like listening to a Beethoven piano sonata. At first, you're thinking, 'Why is he doing that?' But after a while, it becomes clear why he's doing it and what it really means, and then you wonder what other layers are hidden that you'll have to think about long after the concert is over."

"Mobility is not adhering to a particular model that society categorizes," said Sorey, who spent May composing three commissioned works, including *Requiem For A Plague Coda*, which will be paired with a movement from Hans Werner Henze's *Voices* at a festival in Finland, and a piece, dedicated to Peter Sellars, for piano, string quartet and three percussionists. The Sorey-Diehl-Brewer trio is booked for several European concerts in November, and will then record "several albums of material."

Sorey was gratified to see more University of Pennsylvania students "wanting to work with me specifically to investigate the broad field of composition from an Afrocentric lens as well as Eurocentrically," he said. "More people are interested in post-genre music. After seeing people like me perform, they don't see themselves as classical composers, or even electronic composers, but are interested in all areas of music, with no fixed idea of what composition is."

Reinforcing the maestro's point was a one-off gig in June at Manhattan's NuBlue with under-30 rising stars James Francies and Immanuel Wilkins, whom Sorey first encountered as teenagers.

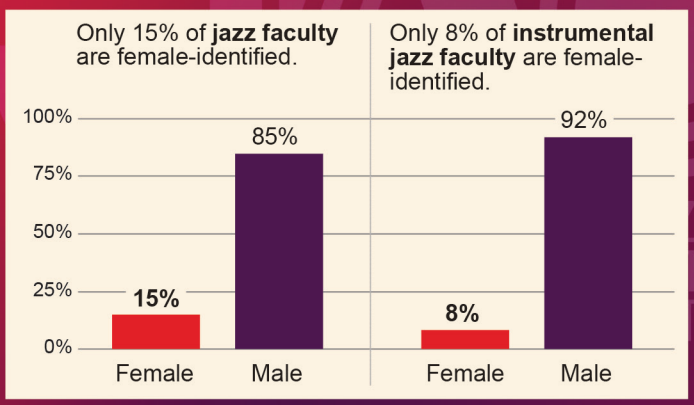
"Tyshawn is a genius," Francies said. "This music has a lot of different time signatures and mixed meters. I sent it to him a few days before the gig. We didn't rehearse, but he memorized and internalized everything, as if he'd come up with it. It felt like we'd been on tour. Immanuel and I were laughing at how amazing he is, not only playing the drums, but how much music is in there. He doesn't waste notes or concepts. Everything is done with a purpose. He's one of the greatest living composers and he's in my top five drummers of all time."

"I've always been known as a physical player, and it was a physical gig," Sorey said. "I haven't done music like that, with intricate forms and synthesizers, for a long time. It was refreshing to be in a situation where I give a million percent of myself — which I always do — to playing music I haven't encountered before, and to be able to really hang with them. You're up there, saying, 'Yeah, I can still do this.'" **DB**

JAZZ COUNTS

A STUDY SPONSORED BY THE BERKLEE INSTITUTE OF JAZZ AND GENDER JUSTICE

Jazz education is still a man's world. The numbers don't lie.



Jazz Counts: Measuring the Jazz Faculty Gender Gap in Higher Education by researcher Lara Pellegrinelli gathers information from the websites of over 200 colleges, conservatories and universities to offer the first comprehensive, quantitative data on women's representation as faculty members teaching jazz. The study shows that male-identified educators are an overwhelming majority of jazz faculty members, surpassing women's representation by a factor of six. Female-identified educators are outnumbered substantially on the most popular jazz instruments; in every faculty rank and as administrators; leading ensembles and teaching studio lessons; as well as teaching academic subjects such as music history, music theory, and composition.

To access the full report, scan here:

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ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Jimmy "Duck" Holmes sings "Catfish Blues."

ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Glenn Schwartz, Auerbach's blues mentor in Akron, Ohio.

JOSHUA BLACK WILKINS

Chicagoan Gabe Carter was discovered through a video of him playing on the streets."

ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Meanwhile, Leo Bud Welch warns against "Dancing With The Devil."

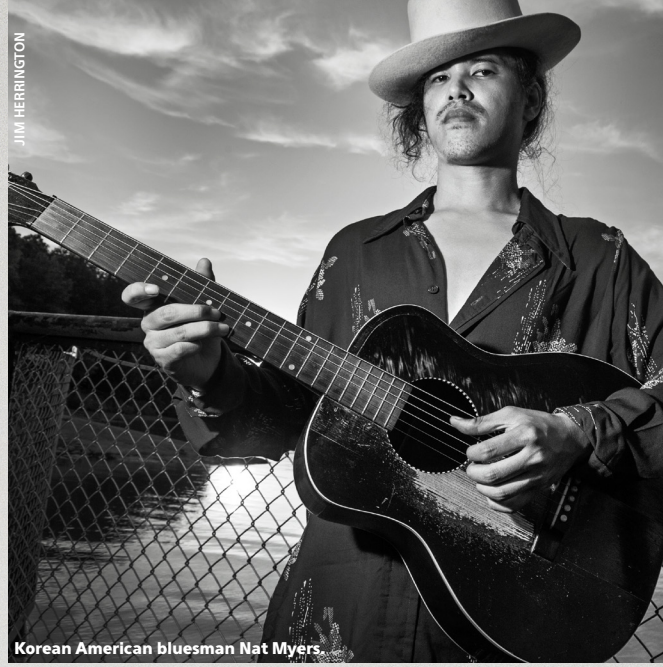
DAN AUERBACH TELLS EVERYBODY!

BY DAN OUELLETTE

The viable flow of the blues continues to cultivate. Elemental and rooted, it has percolated through the American popular music basics, from bebop to hip-hop. It's the godsend of melody and rhythm expressed in a range of emotions, from misery and oppression to humor and raunch. Its architects like to party hard, entice audiences to abandon niceties and pack the dance floor, tell stories with a swell of wisdom.

R.L. Boyce delivers a hypnotic dance party tune.

JOSHUA BLACK WILKINS



JIM HERRINGTON

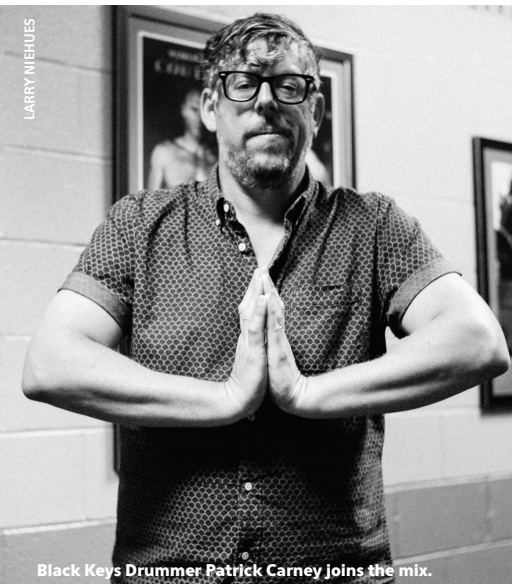
Korean American bluesman Nat Myers.

JIM HERRINGTON

LARRY NIEHUES

The terrific new blues compilation was produced by Dan Auerbach, guitarist for The Black Keys. Auerbach and The Keys both add a tune to the mix.

Robert Finley serves as the cover icon for *Tell Everybody!*


LARRY NIEHUES

Black Keys Drummer Patrick Carney joins the mix.

EVAN CLOSE

Detroit duo Moonrisers bring a whole new flavor.

The stylistic fluidity inherent in the blues informs the heart, the soul. In today's music world dominated by artifice and predictability, the new generation of alt-boogie blues artistry powers on.

The history of the music, from the fertile Mississippi Delta to the survival diaspora in northern cities, has been documented in field recordings (Alan Lomax, Arhoolie Records' Chris Strachwitz) and pioneering record labels like Fat Possum. The latest champion of the blues tradition, *Tell Everybody! (21st Century Juke Joint Blues)*, arrives with the impressive compilation of relatively unknown elders and upstart new-to-the-attention bluesters.

The album is produced by Dan Auerbach, the co-pilot of the dynamic blues-rock cookers The Black Keys and owner of his Nashville-based Easy Eye Sound studio.

"*Tell Everybody!* is not the same-old-blues compilation," says Auerbach via a WhatsApp conversation in Portugal during the final stretch of the blockbuster The Black Keys dates in Europe — its first tour there in nearly 10 years that was populated by, to his surprise, crowd surfing for every show.

"The album is a mixed bag, the ways blues always has been," he says. "It's not pop, it's not polished. It's very raw, gutsy and strange at times. There's magic there. That's why people love it so much. It's not supposed to be at the top of the charts. It's supposed to be in the juke joints because that's what keeps the music alive. It is so potent."

The 12-track collection ranks as the most valuable album of recent times that documents the evolutionary lifespan of the new blues. It includes veterans and such newcomers as the Detroit-based drum-dobro duo Moonrisers who chug through their easy-flowing instrumental "Tall Shadow." Then there's the acoustic dobro spice of the ear-opening Korean-American Nat Myers singing about using the water diviner to dig a well for his woman on "Willow Witch."

"Dan found out about me by viewing my videos on Instagram during the pandemic when I couldn't do any busking," the Kentucky-based Myers explains. "It was a crisis time, and I'm not interested in having the camera turn to myself. But it ended up being a blessing that I was able to meet Dan and begin working with him and talking with him about our shared interests like the rootsy soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* He was interested in me creating new songs in the blues tradition."

Recorded just before the Stop Asian Hate protest movement, Myers wrote new material with Auerbach and his team at Easy Eye Sound for his debut album *Yellow Peril*. "Nat came to me out of the blue with his Instagram posts," Auerbach says. "Instantly I heard Big Bill Broonzy and Sam Chatmon and Furry Lewis with that Delta slide that I love so much. I wasn't hearing music like that anymore."

In lieu of setting up in his studio, Auerbach decided to take the sessions to his 100-year-old house in the countryside outside of Nashville. "I wanted that home sound that's unique," he says. "And you could resonate with it and hear Nat tapping his foot on the wood floor. This was where a blues party should be."

Myers says that he's constantly re-educating himself with the music. "I'm outspoken, swinging my own way," he says. "I'm hoping the blues keeps moving forward. There's a lot to be said in acoustic country music. It continues to speak to a lot of people. It's been awesome to be a part of the cross section of the blues on *Tell Everybody!*"

While Myers is a relative newcomer, Auerbach gives top-billing to the blues guitar megastar Robert Finley, who has opened for numerous Black Keys shows. "Robert slays people," he says. "He has so much energy and the audience feeds off that. When we played Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, he got three standing ovations."

Auerbach recently recorded the 70-year-old Louisiana native's new offering, *Black Bayou*, a visceral, vibrant album set to be released Oct. 27. "This captures Robert's joy and personality," he says. "The whole record was free style, with him telling jokes and making up songs as he went. We were just along for the ride — heavyweight players in the band serving Robert."

That's how the robust guitarist and singer delivered his searing electric fire power on the title track. He's having fun getting his audience aroused for partying and dancing by belting out:

"If you wanna have a good time
Come on out to the shack
Cause you gonna have the time of your life
And you might not never go back"

Auerbach says that he and his crew launched into *Tell Everybody!* to honor the Mississippi hill country blues tradition embodied in guitarists R.L. Burnside and especially Junior Kimbrough who founded the famous Sunday night juke joint jam on Highway 4 between Senatobia and Holly Springs. In 1992 Kimbrough recorded *All Night Long*, and in 1994 Burnside recorded *Too Bad Jim*. "When I first heard their early Fat Possum records, they hit me and made the light bulbs go off in my brain," Auerbach says.

His initial entrée into the blues was through his father's complete Chess Records catalog on vinyl. "I was new to that world," he says. "Those records sounded so fresh, so different. I loved blues music. I listened to video series on Lomax tapes on VHS and read his book *The Land Where The Blues Began*. And then Arhoolie Records. Chris was the king!"

Auerbach, a native of Akron, Ohio, fully plunged into blues guitar when he heard Hound

Dog Taylor and Lightnin' Hopkins. He headed to the library, started taking out more VHS tapes to seek out the players he liked including Hopkins, Fred McDowell, Bukka White. "It was all about play, pause, rewind," he says. "That was my training method. I took a guitar lesson once or twice. I brought a Junior Kimbrough CD to one of my teachers, and this guy had no clue. His only response was that Junior's guitar was way out of tune."

Auerbach stretched out to find blues purveyors nearby. When he was 16, he discovered Glenn Schwartz playing his weekly Thursday-night bar show at the working-class Cleveland club Hoopples. "Glenn was a huge influence on The Black Keys," he says. "He had a homemade guitar with four additional strings because he read in the Bible that music for the Lord must be played on a 10-string instrument. He had giant amps that made the whole bar shake. It was like seeing Cream in a small room. His guitar always sounded so good, and he'd stop in the middle of songs and tell everyone they were sinners who were going to hell for drinking and fornicating, then continued the song. It was bizarre and exciting. On a couple of occasions I recorded him with a hand-held stereo mic. I saw some mythical sets."

Schwartz, who died in 2018, served as one of the original guitarists for Cleveland-based rock band James Gang before Joe Walsh came on board. Down the road, Auerbach recorded Schwartz proper in the Easy Eye Sound studio for two tunes that appear on *Tell Everybody!* With Walsh along for the ride as a guest, the hectic, chaotic Schwartz delivers the gospel blues "Daughter of Zion." The final track of the album is Schwartz delving into sober deep blues on acoustic guitar. He sings the chilling story song "Collinwood Fire" that tells the "hard times" tragic tale of 172 elementary school children dying in a catastrophic fire at Lake View School in suburban Cleveland in 1908.

When Auerbach turned 18, he and his father made a blues pilgrimage to Mississippi that included a visit to Junior's Place. The elder blues statesman had recently passed away, but the rawness of the Delta sound was still strong. Not knowing that the shows were after-dark Sunday affairs, they appeared at the empty parking lot during the day. They were approached by Junior's son Kinny Kimbrough, drummer of the joint. He needed help. "Kinny came up to us, first wondering why we were there in the afternoon, then asking if we could help with the bail to get his brother David out of jail on drug charges for the show that night," Auerbach says. "We gave him some cash, and David was freed."

'I THINK OF THIS AS A RECORD YOU'D WANT TO PUT ON AT A PARTY.'
—DAN AUERBACH

That evening the pair went into the juke joint — a shack patched together by walls of weathered plywood and rusted sheets of corrugated metal. Hand-written signs at the door prohibited drugs and photos. Inside was a standard bar with two-buck beers, a pool table, a couple of old couches, original folk artwork on the walls (including a portrait of Oprah) and murals (ocean waves and white pointed-peak mountains against a deep blue background). The walls were painted blue-green and red and sparkled with tiny silver glitters. The dance floor was packed with grinding, hooting and sweating locals in transcendence.

A hero at the club and a terrific guitarist, David Jr. 3rd arrived to take the stage with Kinny and R.L. Burnside's son Gary on bass. They all played Junior's songs for the set. "It was amazing," Auerbach says. "David was so talented, and yet so troubled." As for his young experience there, he says, "Go to a juke joint the first time, and it will really change you."

On *Tell Everybody!* the leadoff track comes directly from the roots of the Mississippi hills country region with Grammy-nominated singer-electric-guitarist R.L. Boyce mesmerizing with a hypnotic dance-party rendering of "Coal Black Mattie," written by Ranie Burnett. It was a songbook favorite of Burnside and Junior Kimbrough, and The Black Keys dug deep into it on its 2021 *Delta Kream* album. The big draw here is that Boyce is heralded in his home and reigns as the King of Hill Country Boogie.

More compilation highlights include blues elder Jimmy "Duck" Holmes delivering a percussive version of the favorite "Catfish Blues" most noted by the Muddy Waters rendition, and Leo "Bud" Welch, who passed in 2017, putting the gospel blues sting into "Don't Let the Devil Rule." Both are mono versions from their previously released Easy Eye Sound albums.

Chicago-based guitarist Gabe Carter, discovered by a video of him playing on a street, leads two compelling tunes, the down 'n' dirty "Anything You Need" and the twangy, gritty story of two gray wolves on "Buffalo Road."

"I've always loved compilations," says Auerbach. "They've always been influential to me. When done right, they can be a great mixtape. I think of this as a record you'd want to put on at a party."

Two bonuses on *Tell Everybody!* come from The Black Keys and a solo shot by Auerbach. The lovelorn blues rocker "No Lovin'," composed by Auerbach and drummer Patrick Carney and recorded by the duo, was released earlier this year as a singles teaser to announce the upcoming compilation. The catchy party rocker, "Every Chance I Get (I Want You In The Flesh)," drives with three electric guitars and a hip synthesized drone. It's an older song in Auerbach's song catalog that was co-written by his New York collaborator, L. Russell Brown (most famous for writing the 1973 pop hit, "Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Ole Oak Tree," put on the charts by Tony Orlando and Dawn). "He's old school," says Auerbach. "I love how this song feels, so it seems like a good fit to be on the album. The drone is from an Indian sound box machine that I picked up years ago. We call on its powers every once in a while."

As for why he and The Black Keys slide into the rustic blues mix, Auerbach grins. "It helps to move units," he says. "It's an easy way to get this music to more people, Being in The Black Keys is a blessing. It helps in every way to make people aware. On the road we have opening acts like Robert Finley that wake people up."

As a producer, Auerbach has been producing several albums for his Easy Eye Sound label including Finley, Meyers, Holmes and the Oakland-based alt-rock band Shannon and The Clams that was on the road with The Black Keys recently.

"My studio is my happy place," says Auerbach who has had East Eye Sound headquartered in Nashville for the last 13 years, "It's been a constant part of my adult life. I can't do anything else. I'm geared to supporting musicians and songwriters. And the blues? There's no way to stop it." **DB**

POSTSCRIPT: There was a blessing on those who experienced Junior Kimbrough's juke joint. He passed away in January 1998. In April 2000, the building burned down, never to be rebuilt. David Jr. 3rd passed away, age 54, in 2019. Sibling Kinny still drums today, including on Robert Finley's "Tell Everybody" title track.

Paal Nilssen-Love
LIVES & LOVES LARGE

BY PETER MARGASAK

PHOTO BY LARS OPSTAD/KLADD.NO

On the evening of Saturday, March 25, Norwegian drummer Paal Nilssen-Love was seated on the stage of the respected Oslo club Victoria — Nasjonal Jazzscene.

He was being interviewed by Lasse Marhaug, a veteran sound artist and graphic designer, who's worked with the drummer for decades. In the midst of the conversation, Sebastian Uul, performing as Mr. Orkester — an unhinged one-man band — burst in from the rear of the club, turning the proceedings delightfully upside-down. The gathering was the third and final night marking the 10th anniversary of Nilssen-Paul's raucous big band Large Unit, and the drummer was determined to make the occasion both outsized and full of surprises.

LASSE MARHAUG

Large Unit celebrating its 10th anniversary in style.

Between March 23 and 25, he brought together some 40 participants, an international cast of past collaborators, including Japanese reedist Akira Sakata, Amsterdam-based guitarists Terrie Hessels and Andy Moor, and a large contingent of Ethiopian musicians and dancers connected to the Fendika Cultural Center in Addis Ababa. But the central figures of the nightly program were the sprawling crew of Scandinavian musicians that constitute Large Unit. Nilssen-Love also presented a variety of soloists and smaller groupings drawn from the Large Unit ranks, past and present, to say nothing of nightly DJ sets and short sets from deadpan magician Jon Øystein Flink.

Nilssen-Love formed the band in 2013, and the ensemble has persevered through line-up changes, economic difficulties and a pandemic. Obviously, the pandemic put a major damper on that practice and, during the early lockdowns, it took the wind out of his creative sails. "I lost all motivation for playing music," he says. "There was no joy in practicing or playing because it was all so bloody abstract." Still, Large Ensemble has emerged — arguably stronger, more unified and more creatively vital than ever.

The group performed wildly different sets each night, with the stellar assortment of guests, whether it was the Dutch guitarists bookending the stage with their typical manic energy and gestural noise on a new piece one night, or the raft of Ethiopian musicians and dancers turning the occasion into an all-out party as they reprised pieces from the collaborative album Ethiobraz, released in 2019. The venue was festooned with traditional Ethiopian scarves and strings of colored lights, in an attempt to recreate the vibe of Fendika. Speaking to Nilssen-Love a few weeks after the shows in Oslo and around Norway, he's in

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the midst of filling out paperwork required to secure the funding that made the whole crazy endeavor possible.

Few figures in improvised music are as hard-working, relentless and social as Nilssen-Love, who has routinely spent more than 200 nights of each year on the road, going back decades. After spending years as the drummer in Atomic, an excellent Scandinavian post-bop quintet, working in the gritty power trio the Thing, helping power the Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet and playing in countless other bands — both fully improvised and tune-driven — he decided to finally launch his own band with Large Unit, initially designing a series of loose compositions designed to inspire exciting improvisation from a stellar group of musicians. Despite years of experience, the drummer was learning how to run a band on the fly when they began touring in Norway in 2014.

"That was the first time taking my band or a band that I was leading on the road, creating a setlist and to figure who's taking a solo on such and such," he says. "On the first gig, it was perfect. This works fine. So we did it the second night, and I think we did it the third night. And then you could sense that people knew what was going to come. They were all so relaxed, so well rested."

But Nilssen-Love wanted more. He wanted the band to be on edge, ready for the unexpected, so he began changing the set list and how the band traverses the compositions.

"On the first U.S. tour [in 2015], I started cutting pieces into two or three. We would start, let's say, on the third part of one song, go back to the first part of another one and back to the second of the initial song. That refreshed the music and it also kept people extremely focused."

He also learned how difficult it was to maintain an ensemble with a dozen members over the long haul. Lives change — musicians get married, have children, get busy — so the lineup changes occasionally. The drummer found that he enjoyed the new energy — and at one point considered dismissing unavailable musicians — but he also recognized the commitment of the musicians who have stuck with him for years, if not the entire decade. In fact, several former Large Unit members, including trumpeter Thomas Johansson and tuba player Børre Mølstad, turned up for the Oslo celebration to perform as alumni of the band. Nilssen-Love now keeps a steady stable of around 18 musicians in the fold, so there's always knowledgeable backups ready to go, with new faces like the versatile reedist Marthe Lea adding fresh ideas. Still, membership requires a certain devotion, as the material he's been writing for the group requires serious focus.

At the tail end of 2022 the band released two new albums recorded in September of 2021. It was the first time the musicians had convened in nearly two years. The music on Clusterfuck and New Map, both released on the drummer's PNL imprint, reveal distinctly new directions for a 15-member iteration of the band, with material Nilssen-Love conceived of during the pandemic. The core of the first album is built around a graphic score, while the second utilizes map-like notation to organize a dozen discrete compositional cells. "It's bloody difficult to make it work," he says of "New Map." "It demands that people pay attention, take space, give space, move the music. There's a few rules, like one of the cells I just want to be played for 10 bars or whatever. When it works, it's absolutely fantastic," an assessment proven by the recorded version, which is as uncharacteristically tender and lyric — with gentle harp and accordion pierced by skronky guitar during one passage — as it is abstract and jagged. It's ideal execution relies on all of the musicians taking initiative, which has happened slowly, but Nilsson-Love said he's thrilled that tuba player Per-Åke Holmlander, an original member

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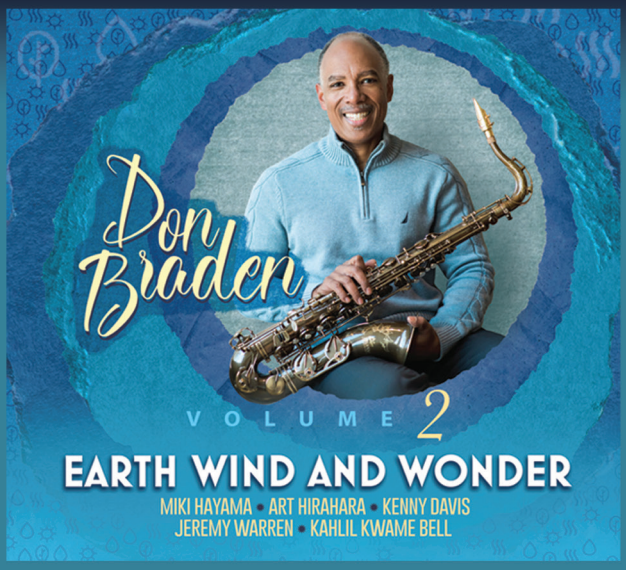

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LASSE MARHAUG

LASSE MARHAUG

It was an international affair, including saxophonist Akira Sakata and an Ethiopian contingent of performers including vocalist Selamnesh Zéméné and dancers Melaku Belay and Zenash Tsegaye.

of the band with loads of experience navigating the procedures of multiple large improvising ensembles — including the Brötzmann Tentet and Ken Vandermark's Territory Band — has proven especially invested. "He's just on fire, let's do more, let's do more, right more, which is very encouraging for me."

While Nilssen-Love expresses excitement for new possibilities for the core line-up of Large Unit, he also can't stop connecting the group with other musicians from around the globe. His deep interest in global music and international collaborators stretches back to the late 1990s, when he and bassist Ingebrit Håker Flaten, a bandmate in multiple combos over the years, worked with the South African saxophonist Zim Ngqawana, a connection made through the Norwegian reedist Bjørn Ole Solberg. That experience, which included making several albums and international tours, helped the drummer use improvisation to connect with musicians from far-flung locales. Back then, the drummer played Ngqawana's pianist, Andile Yenana, a recording he'd made with the Sten Sandell Trio, and after learning that the entire performance was improvised he expressed shock. It was a reaction he encountered again years later with the Ethiopian percussionist Mesay Abebaye.

"He asked me, 'Hey, Paal, what do you call this?' I said, 'What do you mean?' He replied, 'What's the style we just played? Is it swing? Is it bossa?' I said, 'No, it's just improvised music.' Maybe it's wrong of me saying so, but unfortunately, he had to put it in a box so he can understand what it was. Because his idea of just walking on stage and improvising — he would do it, but always tagging it onto a rhythm."

During a workshop in Brazil he first met Paulino Bicolor, a master of the indigenous percussion instrument called the cuica. "We were sitting down doing these different exercises — just making sounds and scribbles, and shadowing each other — and there was nothing related to Brazilian [music] about what we were doing," he explains. "That made him curious to jump over to the other side. I find it interesting that in the end, you're free in all of the styles in all of what you know, through experience."

Before long, Bicolor had become a member of a new Nilssen-Love ensemble called New Brazilian Funk.

These global connections inspire the drummer. "Let's say I go to a country, and I really love what's going on there in terms of culture, music, food, dance," he says. "I would like more people to experience it because I've been there, and I've felt the strength of it, and I want to share that."

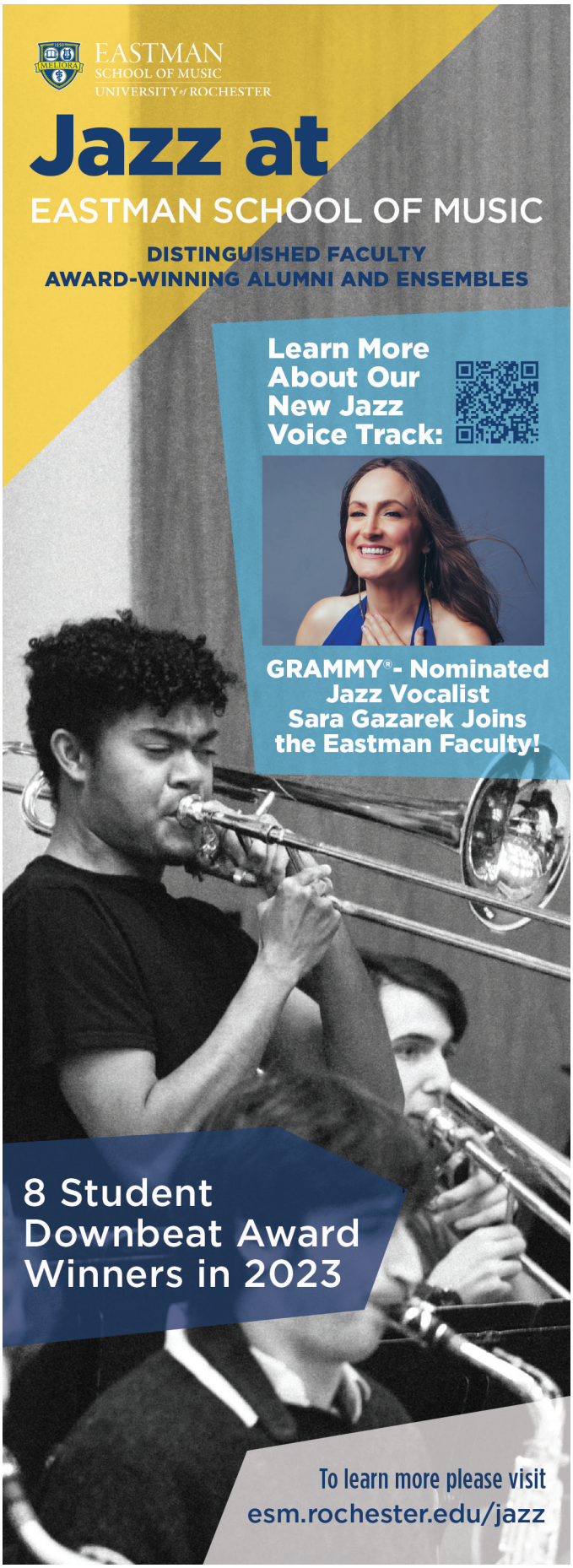
He's well aware of the inequalities that exist between his privileged position as a citizen of a wealthy European nation and many of the places he's visited, and for most of his trips to Ethiopia he's worked hard to leave something in return. On his first trip to Addis Ababa he brought a bundle of old drumsticks and local musicians pounced on them. He noticed one kid practicing with the same sort of sticks he uses. "But his was four centimeters shorter. That's the drumsticks he's had for I don't know how many years? There was not much left."

A few months before the Oslo celebration the Large Unit traveled to Ethiopia to perform and lead workshops at the Yared Music School. Before leaving Nilssen-Love put out a call for musicians to donate equipment and instruments to take along with them.

"We brought tons of instruments with us," he says. "If you're gonna go there, and you've got so many resources, then bring as much as you can. You'll be invited to somebody's home — which is very, very small, probably a fourth of your living room — you are given so much, offered so much food, so much drink, the hospitality and generosity is beyond, and I think most the guys in the band were in shock. It just shows that despite the little they have, they'll always share. Then you go back home and you see the wealth, which becomes quite disgusting when people do not share at all."

When the musicians returned from Ethiopia after the tour they filled the suitcases that had been crammed with musicial gear with traditional scarves, which were sold at the festival in Oslo, with all of the proceeds going back to a school for the blind in Addis.

Nilssen-Love remains involved with many other projects, including Circus — a septet that dials back some of the aggression and introduces a dramatic element through singer Juliana Venter, an acclaimed actress with a magnetic stage presence — Arashi, his trio with Sakata and bassist Johan Berthling, and a new improvising quartet called Sun & Steel with younger figures on the Norwegian scene, including saxophonist Lea, a relative newcomer to Large Unit. But he plans to keep Large Unit active. A new recording by Extra Large Unit — with a line-up that practically doubles the usual number of musicians — recorded last year at the Oslo Jazz Festival is due out soon, and the drummer hopes to perform the recent material at a series of European shows in the fall. "I'm still also pushing myself to write music and to try write different things, which I haven't heard before, or I haven't heard the guys in the bands play before, or I haven't experienced before," he says. "I'm not going to reinvent the wheel, but maybe I can reinvent things for myself." **DB**



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On their second album cut at the Village Vanguard, bassist Eric Revis, drummer Greg Hutchinson and pianist Aaron Parks feed Rosenwinkel all he needs to render a parade of inspired rambles.

JANETTE BECKMAN

Kurt Rosenwinkel
Undercover–Live At The Village Vanguard

HEARTCORE

★★★

Kurt Rosenwinkel is hailed for his athletic technique and clever design strategies. And there's no question: A sly fluency has marked the guitarist's path since his crazed and captivating Human Feel work in the early '90s.

But perhaps his most defining artistic trait lies elsewhere. Sporting an omni approach these last few years, the 52-year-old has begun to sing, made a piano album, clocked a free-prov string'tronics date, interpreted Chopin and waxed sublime on a baritone guitar recital. Couldn't his key descriptor be "explorer"?

Turns out these disparate pursuits nourished the bandleader's muse for this return to the bedrock context of jazz quartet. What some might call Rosenwinkel Classic, *Undercover* has enough fizz and flava to tickle veteran fans while providing newcomers with goosebumps galore.

It's due to the flare-gun solos with which the guitarist rouses the audience, but it's also due to the bonding he and the band enjoy. On the second album he's cut at the Vanguard, bassist Eric Revis, drummer Greg Hutchinson and pianist Aaron Parks feed their boss all he needs to render a parade of inspired rambles, be they born of ballad or burner.

From Parks peppering the action on "Our Secret World" to the entire band's jitter-swing on "The Past Intact," the accord arrives with plenty of tenacity — this stuff crackles. And though I'm not the biggest fan of the pedal-enhanced guitar hues Rosenwinkel chooses (ditto for Parks' keyboard texture in a couple spots), his decision to vary them throughout the date deepens the program's expression. Some might say it adds to the exploration. —*Jim Macnie*

Undercover– Live At The Village Vanguard: Cycle Five; Under Contact; Solé; Our Secret World; Music; Undercover. (53:12)
Personnel: Kurt Rosenwinkel, guitar; Eric Revis, bass; Greg Hutchinson, drums; Aaron Parks, piano, Fender Rhodes.
Ordering info: shop.heartcore-records.com

Joni Mitchell
At Newport
RHINO
★★★★

After a 2015 brain aneurysm, Joni Mitchell learned to sing and play again, hosting all-star "Joni Jam" sessions at her house. This live album documents a Joni Jam produced and presented at the 2022 Newport Folk Festival by Mitchell überfan Brandi Carlile. For the concert, Carlile embraced Mitchell in a brilliantly forgiving ensemble that celebrates her genius while reinforcing her relocated voice, which sounds more like a slightly grainy tenor than the clear, acrobatic soprano of yore.

The songs span four decades, but the meat comes from Mitchell's 1969–'74 confessional heyday, her sound often blended with that of others but occasionally carrying the lead with clarity and poise. Carlile dominates an infectious "Carey," and the vocal duo Lucius helps Carlile carry a crisp 'n' crunchy "Big Yellow Taxi." But after Carlile launches the darkly erotic "A Case Of You," Mitchell takes over, articulating the words with mature pathos. Mitchell also imbues George Gershwin's "Summertime" with a poignant, rich vibrato. But the tour de force is "Both Sides Now," which the singer reinvents in a brown-sugar tone with subtle, wry inflections.

Mitchell is featured just once on guitar, on "Just Like This Train," sans lyrics. That track and "Help Me," are two of the disc's only real disappointments. —*Paul de Barros*

At Newport: Introduction by Brandi Carlile; Big Yellow Taxi; A Case Of You; Amelia; Both Sides Now; Just Like This Train; Summertime; Carey; Help Me; Come In From The Cold; Shine; The Circle Game. (61:27)
Personnel: Joni Mitchell, vocals, guitar (6); Brandi Carlile, vocals; Phil Hanseroth, bass, backing vocals; Tim Hanseroth, guitar, dulcimer, backing vocals; Lucius (Jess Wolfe and Holly Laessig), vocals (2), backing vocals; Taylor Goldsmith, guitar, vocals (4, 10), backing vocals; Celisse, guitar, vocals (9), backing vocals; Blake Mills, Rick Whitfield, guitar, backing vocals; Ben Lusher, piano; Marcus Mumford, percussion, vocals (3), backing vocals; Josh Neumann, cello; Allison Russell, clarinet, backing vocals; Matt Chamberlain, percussion; Wynonna Judd, Shooter Jennings, Kyleen King, SistaStrings (Monique Ross and Chauntee Ross), Jay Carlile, Marcy Gensic, Sauchuen Yu, group vocals.
Ordering info: store.rhino.com

Lowcountry
Lowcountry
ROPEADOPE
★★★½

Too often when drawing from folkloric material, the temptation is to emphasize the primitivism of the source material. Fortunately, trumpeter Matt White, the arranger and composer behind this tribute to South Carolina's Gullah culture, is more interested in maintaining connections than in embalming the past, and as such uses his source material — age-old hymns and blues — not as bricks to build a mortuary, but as the basis for an entirely new structure.

White has already done his share of documentation, capturing the traditional sound of St. Helena Island on 2014's *Gullah: Voice Of An Island*. *Lowcountry* takes that music a step or two further, weaving its melodies and rhythms into a larger compositional framework. White , for example, loops a phrase from the hymn "Day Come Clean" into an ostinato that becomes the rhythmic basis for a chamber jazz chart flavored with strings and clarinets and topped by a Chris Potter tenor solo.

It isn't all church music. "Cheraw," named for Dizzy Gillespie's hometown, is a charming pastiche of Gillespie motifs featuring trumpeter Charlton Singleton from the Gullah roots band Ranky Tanky, and the album opens with a poem by Ron Daise of the TV series *Gullah Gullah Island*. But the strongest moments draw upon sacred themes, from the panoramic treatment of "Where You There" to the lyric eloquence of "Come By Here" — a Gullah classic more commonly known as "Kumbaya." —*J.D. Considine*

Lowcountry: Forgotten Moment; Welcome/Buzzard Lope; Hey Neva; Line The Hymn; Were You There; Watchman; Cheraw; Prayed Up; Come By Here. (55:40)
Personnel: Matt White, trumpet, flugelhorn, composer, arranger (2–9); Charlton Singleton, trumpet (7); Michael Thomas, alto saxophone (2–8), bass clarinet (3); Chris Potter, tenor saxophone (3, 5, 6, 8); Mark Sterbank, tenor saxophone (2–8), clarinet (3); Jerald Shynett, trombone (2–8); Tim Fischer, guitar (2–6, 8–9); Demetrius Doctor, piano (2–9); Rodney Jordan, bass (2–9); Quentin E. Baxter, drums (2–9); Charleston Symphony String Quartet: Micah Gangwer, violin; Alex Boissonnaul, violin; Jan-Marie Joyce, viola; Norbert Lewandowski, cello (3–7, 9); Ron Daise, narration (1, 2, 6); Gracie Gadsen, vocals (2, 4, 5); Joseph Murray, vocals (2–4); Rosa Murray, vocals (2, 4, 6, 8).
Ordering info: ropeadope.com

jaimie branch
Fly Or Die Fly Or Die Fly Or Die ((World War))
INTERNATIONAL ANTHEM
★★★½

During jaimie branch's too-short life (she died in August 2022 at age 39), the forward-leaning trumpeter challenged many a status quo. You can hear her tearing down walls on *Fly Or Die Fly Or Die Fly Or Die ((World War))*, her posthumous release for Chicago's International Anthem label. There's the way she applies the pedal, lulling the ear into a sense of safety, before she interjects animalistic screeches and roiling chords ("aurora rising"). Or her use of repetition in the keyboard, like a soon-familiar drone, even as the trumpet and cello agitate above ("borealis dancing").

These are the record's first two tracks, and it's best to listen straight through in designated order. Intentional or not, each new tune often seems to begin where the previous left off, giving the album a certain continuity of spirit.

Curiously, branch demonstrates a preference for abrupt or messy outros, as if a thought — intriguing, complex — just suddenly ended. Note how a breathless silence descends after the free squawkiness of "and kuma walks," even as the jumble of noise returns on "take over the

world" — this time with a declarative finale. On the last track, "world war (reprise)," branch broadcasts the album's message outright: "What the world could be, if only you could see," she sings. In response, some wind chimes rustle: a gentle farewell. —*Suzanne Lorge*

Fly Or Die Fly Or Die Fly Or Die ((World War)): aurora rising; borealis dancing; burning grey; the mountain; baba louie; bolinko bass; and kuma walks; take over the world; world war ((reprise)). (43:52)
Personnel: jaimie branch, trumpet, voice, keyboard, percussion, happy apple; Lester St. Louis, cello, voice, flute, marimba, keyboard; Jason Ajemian, double bass, electric bass, voice, marimba; Chad Taylor, drums, mbira, timpani, bells, marimba; Nick Broste, trombone (5, 6); Rob Frye, flute (5); bass clarinet (5–7); Akenya Seymour, voice (5); Daniel Villarreal, conga, percussion (2, 5, 6, 7); Kuma Dog, voice (5).
Ordering info: intlanthem.com

The Hot Box

Critics	Jim Macnie	Paul de barros	Suzanne Lorge	J.D. Considene
Kurt Rosenwinkel *Undercover*	★★★	★★★★	★★★½	★★★★½
Joni Mitchell *At Newport*	★★½	★★★★	★★★★	★★
jaimie branch *Fly Or Die ...*	★★★½	★★★	★★★½	★★★★
Lowcountry *Lowcountry*	★★★½	★★★	★★★½	★★★½

Critics' Comments

Kurt Rosenwinkel, *Undercover–Live At The Village Vanguard*

Running the gamut from dry, light amplification to Wes-type octaves and speedy, super-legato, EWI-like runs, guitarist Rosenwinkel and his quartet romp through a warm, happy, celebratory set, with pianist Aaron Parks in a particularly eruptive mood. *—Paul de Barros*

While Rosenwinkel's writing lends itself to inviting ambiance — effervescent chordal progressions, loping movement, noir sophistication — he's not merely about mood. His sleek, linear compositions speak to ordered thought and aesthetic intent. *—Suzanne Lorge*

The guitarist's mastery is long established. But this band matches him lick-for-lick, idea-for-idea, and elevates the music to a plane that's unusual even for Rosenwinkel. *—J.D. Considine*

Joni Mitchell, *At Newport*

Thrilling to see our hero bounce back, and the positive vibes of the love squad surrounding her nourish her attitude. But hosannas aren't that interesting on their own. The best parts here are Joni's age-chafed vocals, not the tribe's interpretations of her ancient gems. *—Jim Macnie*

Over the course of a lifetime, the timbre of Mitchell's voice has moved from the flutey stratosphere to the earthy growl. Even though such changes are to be expected in our vocal artists, we mourn these passages. *—Suzanne Lorge*

This sloppily adoring tribute teeters between showy all-star jam and celebrity karaoke, a balance that may sit well with fans of Brandi Carlile and her coterie but seems embarrassingly overwrought to those who prefer the understatement of Mitchell's studio albums. *—J.D. Considine*

jaimie branch, *Fly Or Die Fly Or Die Fly Or Die ((World War))*

Strong stuff. Across the board the band's throttled motion really sweeps you along. The clarion vibe that was key to her horn sound dominates, even when muted. And, yep, I had to wipe away a tear during the Meat Puppets nod. *—Jim Macnie*

The late and lamented trumpeter delivers her last set, a dark, gutsy punk-jazz outing with neo-primitive drums and (her) urgent vocals. *—Paul de Barros*

Given the growth, both musically and spiritually, between branch's second album and this, it would be natural to feel a sense of loss with this album, were it not that the music is so groove-centered and joyful you can't listen without breaking into a smile. *—J.D. Considine*

Lowcountry, *Lowcountry*

This mix of speech/song testimony can hit ya hard, and its blend with the band is super effective. If a blues essence is waning in modern music, this helps assuage the ache of its absence. *—Jim Macnie*

This ambitious celebration of South Carolina Gullah history and culture weaves field recordings into a contemporary jazz suite with strings and chorus that somehow feels slightly academic and overpolished, especially by contrast to the raw source material. *—Paul de Barros*

On the surface, the admixtures conjured by Lowcountry — beauty/pain, despair/hope, betrayal/promise — seem contradictory. In the tension between these seeming opposites, however, lie the human truths that these musical narratives unveil. *—Suzanne Lorge*

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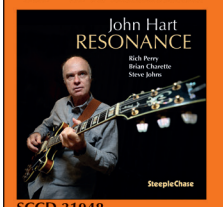

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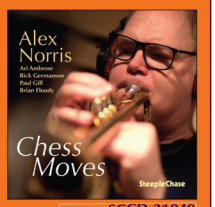

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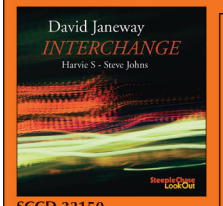

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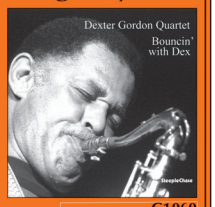

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JoVia Armstrong
Inception
BLACK EARTH
★★★★

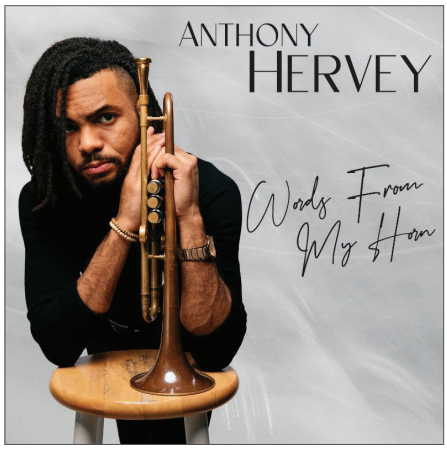
JoVia Armstrong lives a life dedicated to what's next. And her groove- and effects-forward *Inception*, the sophomore record of her group Eunoia Society, is another adamant expression of her tireless musical innovation.

The Detroit native spent the early part of her career serving as a percussionist, background vocalist and tour manager for JC Brooks and the Uptown Sound. In 2019, she came together with electric violinist Leslie DeShazor, whom Armstrong had collaborated with previously in Detroit group Musique Noire, and bassist Damon Warmack, to form Eunoia Society in support of Armstrong's dissertation research at the University of California-Irvine. The experimental jazz ensemble, in which Armstrong plays her signature cajon setup, devotes itself to pairing processed effects with unexpected instruments for an original sound.

Coming together in a vortex of emotion and exploration, *Inception*, which includes the fluid stylings of guitarist Sasha Kashperko, is an otherworldly, introspective and, at times, trance-like six-song record inspired by the story of Armstrong's transition from sheltered, religious child to free-thinking adult. Throughout the adventurous album, traditional musical ideas are turned on their heads as the ensemble plays daringly with effects, including drones, reverb, and delays, as well as with forms both repetitious and free, to mirror the mood of Armstrong's transformation.

Meditative and expressive, *Inception* is a thrilling exhibition of Eunoia Society's mesmerizing sympatico and dynamic jazz mentality. —*Alexa Peters*

Inception: Creation; Embryo; Birth; Babies; Curiosity; Hide, Then Seek. (40:15)
Personnel: JoVia Armstrong, hybrid cajon kit; Leslie DeShazor, electric violin; Damon Warmack, bass; Sasha Kashperko, guitar.
Ordering info: joviaarmstrong.bandcamp.com



Anthony Hervey
Words From My Horn
OUTSIDE IN
★★★★½

As a debut effort, Anthony Hervey's *Words From My Horn* is stunning. The trumpeter's first outing features an impressive array of original compositions showcasing his range and interests. Yet, it is his foray into the blues register that will make one excited about this arrival.

There is a subtle conversation here. The album begins with a tune, "Crystal Stair," a title taken from Langston Hughes' famous poem "Mother to Son." The choice to cite Hughes, a poet who effectively wrote through a prism inspired by the blues, was more than appropriate. We are then thrust immediately into the evocative "The Rust From Yesterday's Blues." There, Hervey takes this theme forward, progressing through a romp that alto saxophonist Sarah Hanahan complements. Continuing the conversation through ragtime is the tune "Du Rag," which nevertheless feels modern. With the penultimate track, "Dreams From The Crossroad," evoking the Terre Haute native's home, Hervey could also be nodding to bluesman Robert Johnson and the Yoruba deity Esu. Just as in the mythology that defines their stories, something happens to us at the crossroads of this project.

Accompanying Hervey there is a quartet featuring some of his fellow Juilliard classmates. Adding vocals on "Smoky Cloud," Hervey's duo performance of "His Eye Is On The Sparrow" with pianist Isiah Thompson precedes the uplifting blues "Better Days." Along with Thompson and Hanahan, a rhythm section featuring Miguel Russell on drums and Philip Norris shows us that blues can create joy and happiness. Not an oxymoron, Hervey's words from his horn take us higher. —*Joshua Myers*

Words From My Horn: Crystal Stair; The Rust from Yesterday's Blues; Neither Here, Nor There; Afro Power; Du-Rag; The Glider; But Beautiful; Smoky Cloud; His Eye Is On The Sparrow; Better Days; Dreams From The Crossroad; Words From My Horn. (64:25)
Personnel: Anthony Hervey, trumpet; Sarah Hanahan, alto saxophone; Isaiah J. Thompson, piano; Sean Mason, piano (5); Philip Norris, bass; Miguel Russell, drums.
Ordering info: outsideinmusic.com

Nicole Zuraitis
How Love Begins
OUTSIDE IN
★★★★

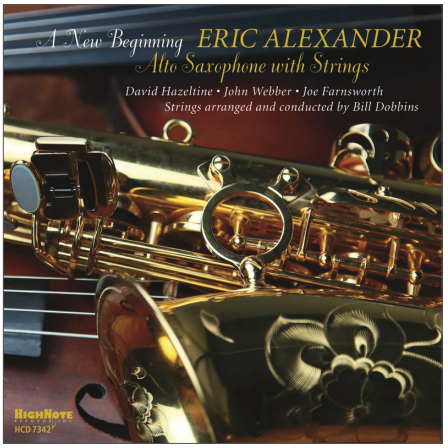
Zuraitis is a pianist, bandleader, singer/songwriter, arranger, composer and vocalist based in New York. She leads her own quartet and often fronts the Birdland Big Band. For her sixth album, she's written 10 impressive songs investigating various aspects of relationships, touching on infatuation, self-deception, apprehension and other aspects of relationships. With the help of co-producer Christian McBride, she's fashioned original arrangements that bring these feelings to life.

McBride's lively bass line opens "The Good Ways." Zuraitis adds subtle accents on a Rhodes as she gives us her impressions of a possible suitor, acknowledging the outrageous risks he takes, singing, "You're only crazy in the good ways." Her vocal is nicely balanced between excitement and resignation.

"Like Dew" is a more cynical take on the same subject. Zuraitis plays a sparse introduction, describing the preparations a woman makes for a date, only to be left standing alone on the street when the guy fails to show up. Her smoky vocals are delivered slower and slower, mirroring the disappointment her protago-

nist feels. On the positive side, "Two Fish" follows a couple as they take a deep dive into the ocean of love. It's a wide-open jazzy blues tune, with McBride's bass, Gilad Hekselman's hushed guitar tones and Zuraitis' minimal piano celebrating the joys of affection. Zuraitis sings in a comfortable tone, adding melismatic accents to deepen the sense of comfort and well-being love can bring. —*j. poet*

How Love Begins: The Good Ways; Travel; Reverie; Let Me Love You; Burn; Two Fish; Well Planned, Well Played; 20 Seconds; Like Dew; The Garden.
Personnel: Nicole Zuraitis, vocals, piano, Rhodes, backing vocals; Christian McBride, bass; Gilad Hekselman, guitar; Maya Kronfeld, organ, Wurlitzer, Rhodes; Dan Pugach, drums; David Cook, piano; Billy Kilson, drums; Sonica (Thana Alexa, Julia Adamy), backing vocals; Edna St. Vincent Millay, lyrics.
Ordering info: outsideinmusic.com



Eric Alexander
A New Beginning: Alto Saxophone With Strings
HIGHNOTE
★★★★½

Any alto saxophone recording with strings will invariably stoke the long-dead coals of Charlie Parker, and Eric Alexander does this with panache right from the start of *A New Beginning*. Yes, the incomparable Bird flutters from Alexander's horn, and riffs and tremolos dart seamlessly through a string of evergreens, most lushly on "All My Tomorrows."

Bracketing the seven ballads with the strings arranged and conducted by Bill Dobbins is "Blues For Diane," and it lends straightahead bop licks to the quartet's artful tincturing of such beautiful tunes as "Maybe September" and "To Love And Be Loved." On these occasions, Alexander and pianist David Hazeltine take turns authoring rippling forays through the lush orchestrations. Their notes roll with a bright continuity off the string voicings, blending at moments almost imperceptibly. One of the loveliest tracks here is "Anita," an Alexander original that is gorgeously rendered.

They are a commanding duo, guiding drummer Joe Farnsworth and bassist John Webber on the vastly reimagined "She Was Too Good To Me," and Alexander is particularly creative in his treatment of this timeless standard. Many will recall Alexander's previous venture with strings on tenor saxophone, and perhaps charting a fresh direction with the alto is what *A New Beginning* means.

Whatever the case, this is great Alexander, priceless Hazeltine, with a Joe and John in the mix — and strings attached — making it a replay-demanding production. *—Herb Boyd*

A New Beginning: Blues For Diane; Embraceable You; All My Tomorrows; Maybe September; To Love And Be Loved; Anita; She Was Too Good To Me; Too Late Now; Blues For Diane. (46:37)
Personnel: Eric Alexander, alto saxophone; David Hazeltine, piano; John Webber, bass; Joe Farnsworth, drums; string arrangements and conducting, Bill Dobbins.
Ordering info: jazzdepot.com

Kate Gentile/ International Contemporary Ensemble
b i o m e i.i
OBLIQUITY
★★★★½

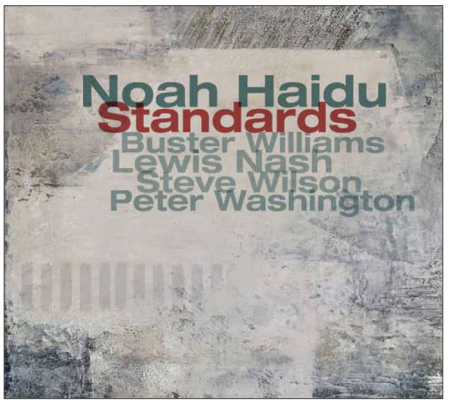
Percussionist and composer Kate Gentile's music is rigorous, and the amount of thought that goes into its creation is audible in every measure. The 13 short pieces that make up this suite are beautiful first and foremost. They unfold like flowers grasping at the sun, and although they are scored for and performed by only seven musicians, they feel like the work of a much larger ensemble — this is orchestral music, performed by a chamber group.

The liner notes indicate that the titles are references to an imaginary landscape; each term is defined, and one can imagine the alien fauna growing and interacting as one listens, eventually coming to hear it as the soundtrack to a nature documentary with its time-lapse photography of flowers blooming, its dramatic action shots of animals catching and eating each other, or its long meditative pauses as light shimmers over water. All these tropes are reflected somewhere in this parade of small, repetitive but ever-shifting melodic cells, where

one instrument briefly dominates the others, then is swallowed up again by the whole. The balance of timbres, with violin, clarinet, flute and piccolo up top; bass clarinet in the middle; piano, vibraphone, and percussion at the bottom (including various junkyard clanks and rattles and surprisingly heavy, almost art-metal drums) gives the whole thing weight and depth, and rewards repeated, close listening.

—Phil Freeman

b i o m e i.i: drobe; ikbii; oergn; bippf; flibb; chorp; nionine; vlimb; xooox; moons; shorm; drode; isth. (52:51)
Personnel: Kate Gentile, drums, percussion; Isabel Lepanto Gleicher, flute, piccolo; Jennifer Curtis, violin; Joshua Rubin, clarinet, bass clarinet; Rebekah Heller, bassoon; Ross Karre, vibraphone, percussion; Cory Smythe, piano.
Ordering info: kategentile.com



Noah Haidu
Standards
SUNNYSIDE
★★★★

Noah Haidu's *Standards* is an eloquent paean to Keith Jarrett's seminal trio. Haidu's playing reminds us that at the core of the music is heart. A follow-up to his earlier tribute to Jarrett also released on Sunnyside, Buster Williams returns for this record, sharing the bass chair with Peter Washington, and joining drummer Lewis Nash and guest Steve Wilson on alto saxophone.

Mostly consisting of tunes made famous by Jarrett, Peacock and DeJohnette, the album ends with Haidu's originals "Last Dance I" and "Last Dance II," which respond to the 2014 Jarrett album of the same name featuring Charlie Haden. Haidu composed it after attending the Standards Trio's last public performance, commenting that he was inspired by Jarrett's challenge for those in the audience, instructing them not to try this at home.

Though Jarrett seems to be implicated everywhere in this record, Haidu's group goes beyond the album's immediate inspiration to find their own footing. Their offering reminds us that an influence does not always render the resulting product derivative.

The addition of Wilson to several of the tunes rounds out the proceedings quite effectively. A great example is the beautiful layering he adds to the trio sounds in their rendition of Wayne Shorter's "Ana Maria." Haidu describes this moment as a meditation on loss, made even more profound in the wake of Shorter's own recent transition.

Transitions in the music in the lives of the musicians are often marked by sound. Sound is an effective tool for memory. Among other attributes, *Standards* allows us to remember.

—Joshua Myers

Standards: Old Folks; Just In Time; Beautiful Friendship; All The Way; Someday My Prince Will Come; You And The Night And The Music; Ana Maria; Skylark; I Thought About You; Last Dance I; Last Dance II (56:28).
Personnel: Noah Haidu, piano; Buster Williams, bass; Peter Washington, bass; Lewis Nash, drums; Steve Wilson, alto saxophone.
Ordering info: sunnysiderecords.com

Tradition Beyond Revivals

Duane Betts: *Wild & Precious Life* (Royal Potato Family; ★★★★ 51:21) The Allman Brothers' legacy is in robust health mostly due to the creative efforts of Derek Trucks (nephew of drummer Butch Trucks) and three sons of original members in the current Allman Betts Band. One of them, Duane Betts, a 45-year-old formerly with his father Dickie's Great Southern Band, stays true to tradition while putting his own imprint on the Southern rock of his first solo album. His singing voice, with its haunted-blues quality, matches well with lyrics that by turns reflect his difficult path through life and his knowledge of love's saving grace. Not unlike the elder Betts, Duane's fingers press the strings of his Les Paul in such a special, confident way that Western Swing-like melodic exaltation breaks out in several of the 10 songs he wrote. Betts makes soul-head-heart connections with bassist Berry Duane Oakley (son of Allman Brother Berry Oakley), drummer Tyler Greenwood and the other musicians.

Ordering info: royalpotatofamily.com

William Lee Ellis: *Ghost Hymns* (Yellow Dog; ★★★★ 37:44) William Lee Ellis, a classically trained guitarist who grew up in Tennessee, earned his acoustic blues stripes back in the early aughts. Then for years he focused on academic studies till recently returning to recording with *Ghost Hymns*. Today his artistic instincts extend from pre-WWII blues, folk, country and gospel to Ghanaian highlife and Madagascan sounds. Northern Vermont college teacher Ellis' voice has an emotional quality that draws a fine line between joy and melancholy, while his impressively controlled guitars (and banjo, on one number) reach the heart of original and traditional songs. He honors his father Tony Ellis, a prominent bluegrass musician, with the old fiddle tune "Earth And Winding Sheet," its beautiful string arrangement by fellow Vermonter Matt LaRocca. Ellis' acoustic music isn't so much a revamping of the past as a new marker in his adventurous, ongoing drive to create a cross-genre music from the wellspring of his imagination.

Ordering info: yellowdogrecords.com/wle

D.K. Harrell: *The Right Man* (Little Village; ★★★ 48:32) While D. K. Harrell, a 25-year-old based in northern Louisiana, isn't yet equipped with his own identity — B.B. King permeates his guitar tone and sound — but his debut release is reasonably entertaining. He's making strides as a developing storyteller, and his singing is gaining in confidence. His idea of modernity is funking up the groove. A dream team supports Harrell: bassist Jerry Jemmott, keyboardist Jim Pugh, drummer Tony Coleman.

Ordering info: littlevillagefoundation.org

ROYAL POTATO FAMILY

Duane Betts stays true to tradition while putting his own imprint on Southern Rrock.

Hudspeth & Taylor: *Ridin' The Blinds* (Hudtone; ★★★½ 39:03) It's not a particularly good time for acoustic duos but there's a strong little community inhabited by worthies like Paul Rishell & Annie Haines, Erin Harpe & Jim Countryman and Cary Morin & Celeste Di Iorio. Not to forget 42-year-old guitarist Brandon Hudspeth and sixtyish vocalist Jaisson Taylor, who started collaborating eight years ago and now offer their second album. Subtle relining of pre-WWII Delta classics by Muddy Waters, Skip James, Bukka White and Fred McDowell, along with traditional fare and samplings of Texas and Piedmont blues, shows they are as honest as the day is long. Hudspeth's fingerpicking is uncommonly skilled, crisp, full of fresh thoughts, and Taylor's toughened-by-life vocals have decent clout. Good as these covers are, though, they are but sparkles silhouetted against the bright light of the masters' 78s. One miscue: James' singularity is such that it's a fool's errand to touch his "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues."

Ordering info: brandonhudspeth.com

The Nick Moss Band: *Get Your Back Into It!* (Alligator; ★★½ 51:40) Chicago's Nick Moss Band, co-starring veteran guitarist Nick Moss and harmonica player Dennis Gruenling, goes down a storm with fans around the world and with the Blues Music Awards cognoscenti. Their third Alligator release of well-played Windy City and updated West Coast jump blues will please the faithful. But a doubter will note that the quintet draws too heavily from familiar tropes and at times seems calculated in their earnestness. A quarter century into his career, Moss isn't much of a singer anymore, and he doesn't get points as a songwriter, either. As a guitarist, he still lives up to his reputation for exceptionally high quality. Highlight: "The Solution," a salute to Jimmy Johnson. **DB**

Ordering info: alligator.com

Brandon Seabrook's Epic Proportions
brutalovechamp
PYROCLASTIC
★★★★

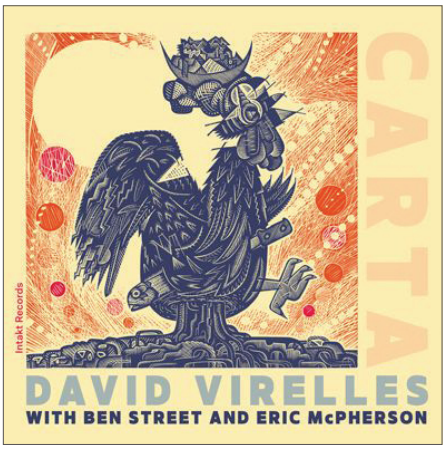
Guitarist and banjoist Brandon Seabrook's newest record, *brutalovechamp*, is a departure from his usual brand of high-octane rock, jazz, pop and metal fusion. Backed by a remarkably adaptive octet, featuring musicians from his 2017 sextet *Die Trommel Fatale*, Seabrook expands his compositional range to include classical, chamber and folk music motifs. The result is a more nuanced and intimate view into Seabrook's creative process.

Seabrook's frenetic lines on guitar, mandolin and banjo give way to orchestral movements, astral jazz improvisation and avant-garde noise rock. In the two-part series "I Wanna Be Chlorophylled," the octet's strings section oscillates between chamber arrangements and angular phrases that act as a foil to Seabrook's frenzied licks and the industrial noise-rock feel of the woodwinds and percussion. On "The Perils Of Self-Betterment," the physicality and feverishness of Seabrook's banjo is paired with Chuck Bettis' ethereal electronics and John McCowen's meandering contrabass clarinet. The octet transitions to a more meditative space on "From Lucid To Ludicrous," where Sam Ospovak's resonant gongs and Marika Hughes' methodical cello step into the foreground.

Seabrook's Epic Proportions approaches jazz and avant-garde chamber melodies with punk-rock energy, which makes *brutalovechamp* a captivating ball of energy that is at turns highly lyrical, aggressively metal and deeply contemplative. —*Ivana Ng*

brutalovechamp: brutalovechamp; I Wanna Be Chlorophylled I: Corpus Conductor; I Wanna Be Chlorophylled II: Thermal Rinse; The Perils of Self-Betterment; From Lucid to Ludicrous; Gutbucket Asylum; Libidinal Bouquets; Compassion Montage. (58:58)
Personnel: Brandon Seabrook, guitar, mandolin, banjo; Nava Dunkelman, percussion, glockenspiel, voice; Marika Hughes, cello; Eivind Opsvik, contrabass; Henry Fraser, contrabass; Chuck Bettis, electronics, voice; John McCowen, contrabass clarinet, B-flat clarinet, alto and bass recorder; Sam Ospovak, drum set, chromatic Thai nipple gongs, vibraphone, concert chimes.

Ordering info: brandonseabrook.bandcamp.com



David Virelles
Carta
INTAKT
★★★★½

Chris Speed Trio
Despite Obstacles
INTAKT
★★★½

Intakt has long been a rich source of American jazz of an adventurous stripe. The Swiss label's recent releases include two prime examples of bold New York artists, saxophonist Chris Speed and pianist David Virelles, stating their artistic cases beyond stifling mainstream standards.

The empathetic relationship between Speed and drummer Dave King has by now gone public through the enrollment of Speed in King's long-standing band the Bad Plus. Speed seems ideal in his new front-line position, supplying restraint, wit and heat when needed. Such qualities are also reflected in King's playing, as heard on *Despite Obstacles*, the third release by the "chordless" Chris Speed Trio.

Speed leads the session with a benevolent and democratic hand. His soft touch and muted tone on tenor, even on the more intense passages, serves him well on his lyrical-yet-angular ballad "Sunset Park In July" and gives distinction to more energetic terrain, as on "Uncomfortable Truths" and the title track.

On *Carta*, Virelles brings his own brand of poise and artful economy to the more common, but ever-malleable context of the classic piano trio format, in tight collaborative esprit de corps with bassist Ben Street and drummer/percussionist Eric McPherson. Improvisation plays a key role in the eight tracks, but always in service of the songs.

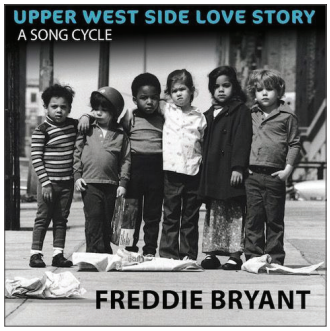
As with other bedazzlements in Virelles' discography, the pianist is carving out a fascinating new musical pathway to call his own. Cuban roots freely intermarry with touchpoints of jazz history (including the present moment), with measured virtuosity and deep musicality in check. Virelles' piano work impresses without distracting from the prime directive: heeding the musical integrity of the song set as an almost narrative whole. —*Josef Woodard*

Carta: Uncommon Sense; Confidencial; Lamento Taino; NY-Chepinsón; Carta; Tiempos; Island; El Tivoli; Samio. (51:09)
Personnel: David Virelles, piano; Ben Street, acoustic bass; Eric McPherson, drums and percussion.

Despite Obstacles: Advil; Wrangled; Uncomfortable Truths; Despite Obstacles; Sunset Park in July; In the Wild; Lone Satellite; Amos. (35:55)
Personnel: Chris Speed, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Chris Tordini, acoustic bass; Dave King, drums.

Ordering info: intaktrec.ch

Freddie Bryant
Upper West Side Love Story–A Song Cycle
TIGER TURN
★★★★



The multitalented Freddie Bryant highlights his native New York City on *Upper West Side Love Story: A Song Cycle*. His project speaks to joys and tribulations common to us all. Over more than 90 minutes, Bryant, fortified by vocalist Carla Cook, violinist Regina Carter and bassist John Benitez, delivers blues, hip-hop, Afro-Cuban, Afrobeat, reggae and spoken word. His passionate lyrics and colorful music suffuse his reflections on a neighborhood so gentrified he had to leave.

Bryant's "haikus" preview tracks that explore topics at greater depth. Many feature Bryant's classically elegant guitar, a balm each time. "His Bed Is a Box: Haiku #6" is a deep blues deploring homelessness. Cook's voice brims with emotion and despair, paving the way for "Intro–Moses The Pharaoh: Who Will Stay And Who Will Go?" —*Carlo Wolff*

Upper West Side Love Story–A Song Cycle: (CD 1) Columbus, Quiet: Haiku #1; Intro–We Used To Dance; We Used to Dance; Intro–Love Can't Live On Nostalgia; Love Can't Live On Nostalgia; Life Of The Playground: Haiku #2; A Walk In The Hood–part 1; A Walk In The Hood–part 2; Lost MJLP: Haiku #3; Intro–My Home Sings; My Home Sings; High-rise Kiss: Haiku #4; Kid'z Rhymes: Remember That? (CD 2) Always Be Aware: Haiku #5; Intro–Roses And Rubies: The Cost of What We Lost; Roses and Rubies: The Cost Of What We Lost; His Bed Is A Box: Haiku #6; Intro–Moses The Pharaoh: Who Will Stay And Who Will Go?; Moses The Pharaoh: Who Will Stay And Who Will Go?; Central Park Life: Haiku #7; Intro–Finale; Finale; Spoken Word: Like Sand Is To Coral; A Box of Pictures: Haiku #8; Last Song: It's Time To Say Goodbye. (48:34/43:32)
Personnel: John Benitez, bass; Freddie Bryant, guitars, vocals; Regina Carter, violin; Carla Cook, vocals; Akua Dixon, cello; Maria Alejandra Hoyos Escobar, voice (track 3, CD 1); Alvester Garnett, drums; Gwen Laster, viola; Donny McCaslin, tenor and soprano saxophones; Roberto Quintero, additional percussion (tracks 3, 5, CD 1); Steve Wilson, alto and concert flutes, alto and soprano saxophones.

Ordering info: freddiebryant.com

Louis Hayes
Exactly Right!
SAVANT
★★★★

It always burns a little bit when an artist's record is reissued with someone else's name on the top, on the grounds that they're the more bankable artist. That happened to Louis Hayes' 1960 debut on VeeJay, which reappeared under Yusef Lateef's byline as *Contemplation*. Unfair, when it's so obviously the drummer's album, without slipping into that awkward category of "drummers' albums."

"Underrated" is another weaselly term in music criticism; easy to throw around generously but bordering on meaningless much of the time. If anyone merits it, it's Hayes, who was been making records for seven decades but has never been elevated in the manner of some of his peers. But just listen to his interpretation of Cedar Walton's "Ugetsu" here, or that difficult, twisty line of "Nefertiti," and it's obvious what a master he is — master of the simple things, rather than of mazy complexities.

Working with Hazeltine, who includes Walton and Oscar Peterson among his audible influences, and Steve Nelson, a like-minded exponent of fat-free vibes playing, he produces beautifully open-form jazz that's instantly communicative but still engagingly subtle and provocative.

Hayes has certainly been taken for granted up to now. This one should do something to spark a little deeper appreciation. —*Brian Morton*

Exactly Right!: Exactly Right!; Is That So?; Hand In Glove; So Many Stars; Carmine's Bridge; Nefertiti; Mellow D; Theme For Ernie; Scarborough Fair; Ugetsu. (54:50)
Personnel: Abraham Burton, tenor saxophone; David Hazeltine, piano; Steve Nelson, vibraphone; Dezron Douglas, bass; Louis Hayes, drums.

Ordering info: jazzdepot.com

Ashby's Early LPs Restored

Dorothy Ashby–With Strings Attached **(New Land; ★★★★ 3:33:49)** is a lavishly packaged, vinyl-only, limited edition collection of six albums recorded by the gifted, innovative harpist between 1957 and 1965. It serves her well: Ashby (neé Dorothy Thompson, 1932–'86) can be overlooked no more. Embracing her highly flexible instrument, she had a lustrous career starting with these albums, eventually extending to first-call studio status, collaborations with stars including Stevie Wonder and posthumous clips used by today's producers.

She was abetted at the start of her career by Frank Wess, who arranged the Detroiter's debut recording in New York for the short-lived Regent Records. Wess is co-billed on the first three LPs included here, playing flute to help set a standard of classy, entertaining, subtle and often seductive takes on standards and blues. But Ashby herself demonstrates wit, grace and substance. Her music is a treat for those who prize tuneful, swinging, sophisticated jazz, structured freshly if rather conventionally for its era and market.

Sixty-six years later, however, *The Jazz Harpist* sounds fresh and true, hewing to the original mixes of the six albums by original engineers Rudy Van Gelder and Tom Dowd, among others. Good taste and exquisite execution have staying power. "Thou Swell," the opener, establishes the Ashby-Wess duo's crisp yet warm feel, suggesting flirtation, if not intimacy. The harp — aka lyre, veena, chang, yaal, depicted in Egyptian art as early as 3000 B.C. — has famously gentle timbres and resonance. It can be manipulated for harsher sounds, but Ashby embraces its essence, the touch of fingertips to strings, letting their vibrations ring but never overdoing it for bathos. She is restrained, cool, noble. Wess' fleet flute is the perfect balance against supple rhythms provided by bassist Wendell Marshall and drummer Ed Thigpen, and on *Hip Harp* and *In A Minor Groove*, subsequent Prestige releases, bassist Herman Wright and understated Art Taylor and Roy Haynes.

Ashby's programs are characterized by her catchy compositions ("Aeolian Groove," "Pawky," "It's A Minor Thing") and apt American songbook choices ("There's A Small Hotel," "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To," "Alone Together"). She's a constant, as enriching when she comps as she is forthright building solos, floating her figures deftly, spinning out phrases flecked sparingly with arpeggios and glisses for emphasis and color. Her two hands work together more like an ambidextrous knitter's than a pianist's or guitarist's. She is adept at trading quick phrases, but her true metier is orchestrating songs for her instrument. One sterling example: "Yesterdays," cinematic and heavenly.

Dorothy Ashby had a lustrous recording career.

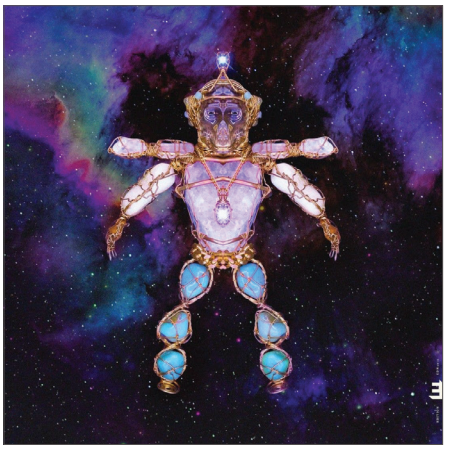
On *Soft Winds*, well-matched with vibist Terry Pollard, Wright and drummer Jimmy Cobb, Ashby applies her approach happily on tracks including "The Man I Love" and "I've Never Been In Love Before," but can't do much to avoid sentimentality on "Laura" and "Misty." If commerciality steered her towards make-out music and exoticism, she usually circumvented schmaltz, preferring tart themes like "Secret Love," elegant ones like "Satin Doll" and "Li'l Darlin'," or deep drama as in her take on "Gloomy Sunday."

High sales eluded Ashby, but aficionados appreciated her art. In 1965 Atlantic Records producer Arif Mardin supervised *The Fantastic Jazz Harp Of Dorothy Ashby*, featuring bassist Richard Davis, conguero Willie Bobo, drummer Grady Tate and a four-man trombone section on four tracks (including "House Of The Rising Sun" and the Israeli folk song "Dodi Li"). Oddly, these arrangements (uncredited; are they Ashby's, Mardin's or Ollie McLaughlin's?) work. The horns murmur support and lay easily over the rhythm team, and Jimmy Cleveland's one solo is in the groove.

As Ira Gitler wrote in liner notes reproduced here, Dorothy Ashby was neither the first (Caspar Reardon) nor the first female jazz harpist (Adele Girard). In the 1940s, Paul "Spike" Featherstone played harp in Space Cooley's Western Swing band. But Dorothy Ashby brought the harp to contemporary materials from bebop to beyond (hear her Middle Eastern-inflected *Rubáiyát*, not included in this collection).

Forty years since her death, having been sampled ad infinitum, Dorothy Ashby's music is restored to life as she made it in the day, proving every instrument has potential that transcends stereotype, depending on the personal resources of the person playing it. **DB**

Ordering info: newlandrecords.co.uk



Marquis Hill
Rituals + Routines
EDITION
★★★½

This quick hit from trumpeter, composer and producer Marquis Hill leaves a long-lasting impression. *Rituals + Routines* deepens Hill's unique recipe of jazz, hip-hop, R&B and electronica and positions him as a sound sculptor in the new tradition of Makaya McCraven or Christian aTunde Adjuah.

Hip-hop appears here more in the sense of beats than of rapping — however, spoken words also play a role. Each track features verbal commentary about a ritual/routine from a typical day in the human life. On "Stretch (The Body)," it's a looped lecture about those rituals in general. What follows has a remarkable variety, featuring strong rhythmic work from bassist Junius Paul and drummer Indie Buz and electronic washes from keyboardist Micheal King.

Hill's trumpet is less prominent; on tracks like "Cleanse (The Waters)" and "Break (Fuel)" it blends into the ambient wash. When it is a more assertive voice, as on "Rise (All Possibilities)" and "Breathe (Give Thanks & Gratitude)," it is no less ambient, if impressive and artfully applied.

Given its brevity, the album bypasses extended improvs in favor of atmosphere and mood. Tracks begin, linger long enough to make their point, and leave. One has to conclude that it's meant more as a momentary meditation than a full-length artistic statement, and at this it does a marvelous job. Still, it'd be nice to hear the individual players and special guests, most of them talented and soulful jazz improvisors, with opportunity and space to really munch on these ideas. *—Michael J. West*

Rituals + Routines: Rise (All Possibilities); Breathe (Give Thanks And Gratitude); Stretch (The Body); Cleanse (The Waters); Smoke (Herbs & Teas); Peace (Be Still); Break (Fuel); Outside (Protected). (24:36)

Personnel: Marquis Hill, trumpet, flugelhorn, effects, vocals; Michael King, piano, Rhodes, organ, synths; Junius Paul, bass, toys, effects; Indie Buz, drums, toys, percussion; Braxton Cook, alto saxophone (4), vocals (4); Joel Ross, vibraphone (3); Ariesfoolmoon (1), G. Thomas Allen (6), Doelow Da Pilotman (5), Phoelix (8), vocals.

Ordering info: editionrecords.com

Yosef-Gutman Levitt
Soul Song
SOUL SONG
★★★½

Yosef-Gutman Levitt was born and raised in South Africa, started playing the electric bass when he was 16, and two years later moved to the United States to attend Berklee. After a period in New York, he became disillusioned with both his playing and the scene, so he dropped out of music, moved to Israel in 2009 and had a successful technology business.

In 2019 Levitt returned to music full-time, this time playing the acoustic bass guitar. He credits his time away from trying to make a living out of music with him developing his own original style.

Soul Song is Levitt's eighth recording as a leader. His previous, *Upside Down Mountain*, was a trio date with pianist Omri Mor and drummer Ofri Nehemya. Soul Song adds guitarist Lionel Loueke, who attended Berklee at the same time as the bassist and has long been a musical friend.

Throughout the 14 Levitt originals, the quartet sounds very much like one voice, exploring the folkish and often spiritual melodies with subtle creativity. The individual statements are a logical outgrowth of the ensembles and the playing of the four musicians is very compatible, adding variations to the themes and reacting instantly to each other's ideas. It is easy to enjoy the sound and unclassifiable style of the group, which can be thought of as a latter-day Oregon. Their music is gentle but never sleepy, and there are enough mood and rhythmic variations to hold onto one's interest throughout this quietly delightful outing.

—Scott Yanow

Soul Song: Chai Elul; Soul Song; Myriad; Song Of The Sea; The Tender Eyes Of Leah; Amud Anan Duet; Torah Tsiva; Lanu Moshe; Kave El Hashem; Devotion; Tikum; Kol Dudi; Desert Song; Hashkama; Amud Anan. (61:04)
Personnel: Yosef Gutman Levitt, bass; Lionel Loueke, guitar; Omri Mor, piano; Ofri Nehemya, drums.
Ordering info: yosefgutman.bandcamp.com

Kaisa's Machine
Taking Shape
GREENLEAF
★★★★

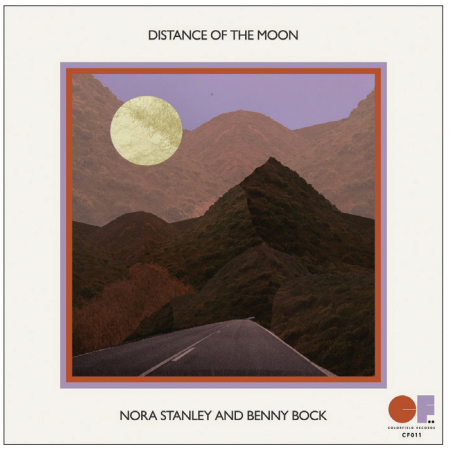
The great Michael Hamburger said that the whole project of modernism — and jazz is the quintessential modernist art form — was a continuing conflict/tension/dialogue between the essentially rural (bucolic, pastoral) and the urban. There's a strong hint of that in Kaisa Mäensivu's music. She left her native Finland seven years ago and has since been coming to terms with the still overwhelming confluence of cultures and musical styles that is New York.

It used to be said that the Finns are a people silent in two languages, and there's a certain gentle truth in that. Kaisa's been listening quietly since she came to America and her solo on "Dream Machine" is a quasi-autobiographical picture of her coming to terms with a noisy, polyglot city. Even the cover image, with a few flower-buds dotted around her dress, shows she's not leaving her old world entirely behind. Finland, in its odd way, is a different kind of cultural melting pot, and so that instinct is already in her. What's happened since the first album, though, is that the bass, instead of being a routine component of the rhythm section, has become the main compositional voice of the group. Her bowed part on "Sink Or Swim" is a perfect miniaturization of what her music is now about.

Taking away the piano on "Gravity" was a clever stroke; this group really is Kaisa's machine. The group around her is responsive and tough minded, but they know who's boss. This is a debut record of a sort, but only in the sense that all great creative records are debuts. There will be much more to come.

—Brian Morton

Taking Shape: I; Floating Light; Dream Machine; Gravity; Aurora Unbound; II; Better Intentions; Sink Or Swim; III; Shadow Mind; Sizzler; East Dessert First. (62:34)
Personnel: Kaisa Mäensivu, bass; Tivon Pennicott, tenor saxophone; Sasha Berliner, vibraphone (3, 4); Max Light, guitar; Eden Ladin, piano; Joe Peri, drums.
Ordering info: greenleafmusic.com



Nora Stanley & Benny Bock
Distance Of The Moon
COLORFIELD
★★★★½

This brief album of evocative, deceptively lightweight instrumental sketches pulls from a variety of traditions and styles. The thing about young people is that they don't draw the same genre boundaries their parents and grandparents did. You can't scare them by pointing out that, say, "Vista Ahead" is pure smooth-jazz, dripping from the speakers like melted butter as Nora Stanley and guest guitarist Jeff Parker, a man whose hip credentials are unimpeachable, play unison lines with Jacob Richards laying down a quiet but emphatic beat, heavy on hissing cymbals, and synths filling out the arrangement in a Thundercat/Kassa Overall style.

Stanley's saxophone is recorded extremely closely, so that the clapping of the keys are practically as loud as the notes themselves, and she overdubs two and three times, harmonizing tightly with herself. On "Assembling," strings and percussion swirl behind her, creating a backing track reminiscent of lush '70s soul, or at least its smoky Soulquarian reincarnation; the tripled horns could have come off D'Angelo's *Black Messiah*. Meanwhile, the haunted-sounding piano on "Maurice" brings to mind Tom Waits. "Two" is even more indie-jazz, oozing vaporwave synths laying down a bed of hold music over which Stanley lays off-kilter, disjointed lines that draw from Pitchfork-friendly R&B, before a pedal or a production effect warps them into a shimmering heat haze. "Like Smoke" features Mark Guiliana behind the kit; it lives up to its title, floating through the room and gradually drifting away.

—Phil Freeman

Distance Of The Moon: Hawk Hill; Assembling; Vista Ahead; Maurice; Interlude; Into The Flats; Like Smoke; Peaches; Two; Distance Of The Moon. (30:34)
Personnel: Nora Stanley, saxophone, synthesizers, percussion, kalimba, drum programming; Benny Bock, piano, Fender Rhodes, Hammond B-3, pump organ, synthesizers, baritone guitar, percussion, drum programming; CJ Camerieri, trumpet, French horn; Jeff Parker, guitar; Daphne Chen, violin, viola; Owen Clapp, upright bass; Doug Stewart, electric bass; Mark Guiliana, drums; Myles Martin, drums; Jacob Richards, drums; Abe Rounds, drums.
Ordering info: colorfieldrecords.com

Joe Alterman
Big Mo & Little Joe
JOE ALTERMAN
★★★½

In this tribute to his mentor Les McCann, Atlanta-based pianist Joe Alterman conveys a real sense of joy in his interpretations of McCann tunes from the '60s, '70s and into the 2000s. Exhibiting an unhurried, comfortably sparse sensibility at the piano, à la McCann or Ramsey Lewis, as opposed to the more pyrotechnic approach of an Oscar Peterson or Phineas Newborn, Alterman and his copasetic crew of bassist Kevin Smith and drummer Justin Chesarek dig into these eleven vehicles with warmth and gusto. The results are predictably upbeat, straightahead and in the pocket.

You can hear strains of McCann's signature churchy exuberance — a quality exhibited most famously on his interpretation of Gene McDaniels' "Compared To What" (which is not in this collection) — on "Beaux J. Poo Boo" and "Come On And Get That Church." They delve into funky waters on "Someday We'll Meet Again" (originally from 1977's *Another Beginning*), deliver a tender reading of McCann's ballad "Could Be" (which he originally recorded with the Gerald Wilson Orchestra in 1964) and summon up an infectious second line groove on "Ruby Jubilation." And their rendition of McCann's shuffle blues "Big Jim" is brimming with swagger.

Alterman closes out the collection with a poignant solo reading of "Don't Forget To Love Yourself," a tune he co-composed with McCann for his 2020 release *The Upside Of Down*. Alterman's eighth recording as a leader is both a glorious gesture of thanks and a gift to lovers of soulful jazz. —*Bill Milkowski*

Big Mo & Little Joe: Come On And Get That Church; Could Be; Beaux J. Poo Boo; Samia; The Stragler; Dorene Don't Cry; Someday We'll Meet Again; It's You; Don't Forget To Love Yourself; Ruby Jubilation; Big Jim. (60:32)
Personnel: Joe Alterman, piano; Kevin Smith, bass; Justin Chesarek, drums.
Ordering info: joealtermanmusic.com

Ruslan Sirota
Fruits Of The Midi
HONEY ROSE
★★½

Keyboardist-composer Ruslan Sirota is originally from the Ukraine, where he was classically trained; grew up in Israel; and at 18 moved to the United States to study at Berklee. He has since worked with Stanley Clarke, Kamasi Washington, Marcus Miller, Al Jarreau and a variety of jazz and R&B groups. *Fruits Of The Midi* is his third recording as a leader.

The musicianship of the players on his CD is top-notch and there are guest appearances from guitarists Pedro Martins and Kurt Rosenwinkel, Dayna Stephens on soprano, and altoist Eric Marienthal. Sirota and Yan Perchuk co-composed all the songs other than "At Last."

The problem with this set from the jazz standpoint is that no one ever cuts loose, the performances are often overly concise, and nearly all the pieces are in the same laidback, thoughtful mood. One can certainly imagine this safe recording being used for a soundtrack or for background music. No one sounds as if they are sweating or attempting to stretch themselves.

Sirota's playing on keyboards is occasionally reminiscent of Chick Corea although without the fiery creativity. The Latin rhythms on some

selections are a strong asset and Sirota's tradeoff with Dayna Stephens on "Bourbon Person" is a highlight, but little else happens that distinguishes one performance from another. None of the melodies stick in one's mind afterwards, and even the closing "Nightingale," dedicated to the Ukraine, lacks passion. —*Scott Yanow*

Fruits Of The Midi: Overture Americana; The Becoming; La Bandera; Fruits Of The Midi; At Last; Boondoggle; Bourbon Person; Laine (As We Forgive); Bayesian Hope; Nightingale. (42:58)
Personnel: Ruslan Sirota, piano; Kurt Rosenwinkel, Pedro Martins, Mike Miller, guitar; Hadrien Feraud, Darek Oles, Benjamin Shepherd, Dan Lutz, bass; Chaun Horton, drums; Pedrito Martinez, Pete Korpela, percussion; Mike Cottone, trumpet; Ido Maimon, trombone; Lissa McCormic, French horn; Ian Roller, Dayna Stephens, Eric Marienthal, sax; Katisse Buckingham, flute; Natasha Agrama, Genevieve Artadi, vocals; Budapest Art Orchestra.
Ordering info: ruslanmusic.com

Transatlantic Five
Transitions
NEMU
★★★

As the band name implies, this quintet pairs musicians from each side of the Atlantic, bringing together American reedist Ken Vandermark and trumpeter Nate Wooley with the European rhythm section of vibist Christopher Dell, bassist Christian Ramon and drummer Klaus Kugel. The quintet came together for a brief European tour in August of 2022 and made this recording, loosely designed to celebrate the work of Eric Dolphy: an homage made most clear on the opening Dell composition "Around Town."

There's no missing the wide intervals in the melody traced by the horns or the way it's punctured by the spiky interjections of the vibraphonist, but once the theme has been stated, the group pivots to a more open attack. The highlight of the album is the only other composed work, Vandermark's "En Attente," a slowly unfolding ballad that demands a different energy and a more focused dynamic sensibility.

The quintet's primary raison d'être is improvisation, and the bulk of the album is constructed around a set of six freely improvised works. Each section of the band has logged plenty of experience together, with Vandermark and Wooley developing an almost preternatural vibe through an ongoing duo project, while the Europeans have also worked together often in different contexts.

They all mesh rather well here, and it's clear that all five players are locked in, but in the end the album feels a bit ordinary despite some exciting flourishes. Indeed, it's always a treat getting to hear how improvisers navigate new situations in real time, but as Dolphy himself famously said, "When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone in the air. You can never capture it again." —*Peter Margasak*

Transitions: Around Town; Transition 1: Transition II; Transition III; En Attente; Transition IV; Transition V; Transition VI. (60:19)
Personnel: Nate Wooley, trumpet; Ken Vandermark, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Christopher Dell, vibraphone; Christian Ramond, double bass; Klaus Kugel, drums.
Ordering info: nemu-records.com

Tony Allen

Lonnie Liston Smith
JID017
JAZZ IS DEAD
★★★★

Tony Allen
JID018
JAZZ IS DEAD
★★★★

What began a couple years ago as an innovative way to call living legends back to the carpet and show that with the right folks around them, they've still got it, has turned into a regular showcase of those who are getting their flowers. As producers, Adrian Younge and Ali Shaheed Muhammad play to each guest's strengths for their respective Jazz is Dead album, and this is nowhere clearer than on the series' 17th and 18th releases.

Lonnie Liston Smith gets a party going and keeps the funk alive, always finding something interesting and beautiful to say on the keys. Vocalist Loren Oden fits in the Smith sessions perfectly; as a frequent collaborator with Younge, Oden was the right call for appearing on nearly half of *JID017* and feeling like the dawning of another Age of Aquarius. So many of these albums feel like unearthing lost '70s sessions and Oden's vocals are key to this feeling.

Tony Allen, in one of his last sessions, is the soul of a mighty ensemble. It's awe-inspiring how he keeps a beat so steady and simple, so focus grabbing in its showy un-showiness, how it's a half hour about the man as much as it is about the band. That's always been the kind of player Allen was. He's always made the most sense with a strong horn section and these folks fit the bill. Like all JID albums, these songs feel like distillations of what could be such larger jams. It's just a joy to have these.

All the while, it's the multi-instrumentalist maestro Adrian Younge giving all the right guidance on these albums with Ali Shaheed Muhammad in tow, playing every other instrument that they didn't hire sessionists to play. These two have consistently been chefs putting together all the right ingredients for these brilliant courses. Each of these half-hour albums are as enjoyable and replayable as the last. For these guys to make each Jazz is Dead album sound so much like a part of the series while also maintaining their own sense of distinctiveness is as much a credit to their production ability as it is their curation of collaborators, the legends and the backing players alike. By this point, everyone knows what the assignment is.

It raises the spirits a bit knowing the prolific Tony Allen is still releasing work this sharp even after death. And it's extremely cool that Lonnie Liston Smith at age 82 has such jubilant music in him to share. Younger and Muhammad have known this about all the legends they've celebrated in this project, but the most astounding thing about it is there's no sign of flagging. —*Anthony Dean-Harris*

Lonnie Liston Smith JID017: Love Brings Happiness; Dawn; Cosmic Changes; Gratitude; Love Can Be; Fete; Kaleidoscope; What May Come; A New Spring. (34:08)
Personnel: Lonnie Liston Smith, acoustic piano (1–4), Fender Rhodes (5-9); Adrian Younge, electric guitars (1–9), electric bass (1, 3–5, 8), alto saxophone (1, 3, 5–6, 8), sopranino saxophone (1, 3, 6), monophonic synthesizer (1–5, 7-8), clavinet (1, 4, 9), vibraphone (1, 4, 9), percussion (1, 3–9), Mellotron (2, 9), flutes (2, 7), Hammond B-3 organ (3, 5, 7–8), acoustic guitar (3), auto-harp (4, 9); Ali Shaheed Muhammad, Fender Rhodes piano (1), electric bass guitar (2, 6, 9); Loren Oden, vocals (1, 3, 5, 9); Greg Paul, drums (1–5); Malachi Morehead, drums (6–9).

Tony Allen JID018: Ebun; Steady Tremble; Oladipo; Don't Believe The Dancers; Makoko; Lagos; No Beginning; No End. (27:57)
Personnel: Tony Allen, drums; Adrian Younge, electric bass guitar, electric guitars, acetone electric organ (1–6, 8), marimba (1–2, 4, 6, 8), percussion (1–4, 6–8), Orgatron (2), Yamaha YC-25D (3), Wurlitzer electric piano (7); Marcus Gray, additional percussion; Jazmin Hicks, additional percussion; Loren Oden, additional percussion; Scott Mayo, flute; Phillip Whack, alto saxophone; Jaman Laws, tenor saxophone; David Urquidi, baritone saxophone; Jacob Scesney, baritone saxophone; Emile Martinez, trumpet; Tatiana Tate, trumpet; Lasim Richards, trombone.
Ordering info: jazzisdead.com

MARK SHELDON

The Busselli/Wallarab Orchestra

Big Bands for the Superego

The history of big-band jazz has been its upward mobility, from babysitting fervent flappers and jitterbugs to art-house ensembles where everyone sits quietly and pays attention. The tipping point came grudgingly. But once Goodman, Basie and Ellington made Carnegie Hall, young arrangers like Eddie Sauter, Billy Strayhorn, Ralph Burns and Gil Evans felt permitted to write for jazz's superego, not its id. Here are five concert bands today for the superego.

The original jazz bands were children of show business and indigenous to big-city ballrooms. The earliest sustained recording began in 1922 when Gennett Records scouted the new Chicago scene where young lions like Armstrong, Beiderbecke, Morton and even Hoagy Carmichael played for dancers. Gennett imported them to its "studio" in Richmond, Indiana, and from these sessions sprang the first canon of authentic standards in the jazz repertoire. This is the raw material for the two-CD ***The Gennett Suite*** **(Patois; ★★★★ 47:14/36:54)** by the **Busselli/Wallarab Orchestra**, in which Brent Wallarab reimagines century-old themes like "Tin Roof Blues," "Riverboat Shuffle," "King Porter Stomp," "Davenport Blues" and six others into a contemporary suite. Like Gil Evans and Henry Threadgill before him, he intends neither an earnest repertory-style duplicate nor a cartoonish, cut-and-paste mockery of '20s pop culture. Using a stylish modernism, he dresses them in a 21st-century context so we can hear them played with care for fresh ears in today's terms. For those who've let their homework slide on the early jazz songbook, there's a richly appointed, 68-page booklet to provide a scrim of antiquity.

Ordering info: patoisrecords.net

Florida jazz educator **Chuck Owen** uses ***Renderings*** **(MAMA; ★★★ 73:02)** and the **WDR Jazz Orchestra** of Cologne, Germany, mostly to showcase original concert works by himself and band members. The WDR provides a carefully measured balance that is spotlessly captured and mixed: each player with his own mic and isolated in his own headset. It serves Owen's intent. His arrangements look for subtle challenges to settle as they emphasize a leisurely emotional impressionism in pieces like "Fall Calls," full of cool pastel color balances. There's not a lot of heat to rustle the velvety textures. Craft supplants passion.

Ordering info: mamarecords.net

In **Doug Beavers'** ***Luna*** **(Circle 9 Records; ★★★½ 54:11)**, the trombonist offers his *Luna Suite*, a six-part sequence intended to express the ocean's response to the gravitational push-pull of sun and moon through the dialects of salsa, Afro-Latin and Portuguese idioms. It sounds more serious than it is. Once past the brief intro, the brass toss the physics of oceanography to the winds and dominate "Tidal" with a zesty indifference to intent. The music moves according to its own path with an easygoing vigor as Beavers blows with smooth authority. The trombone quartet on "Flor de Lis" is a standout.

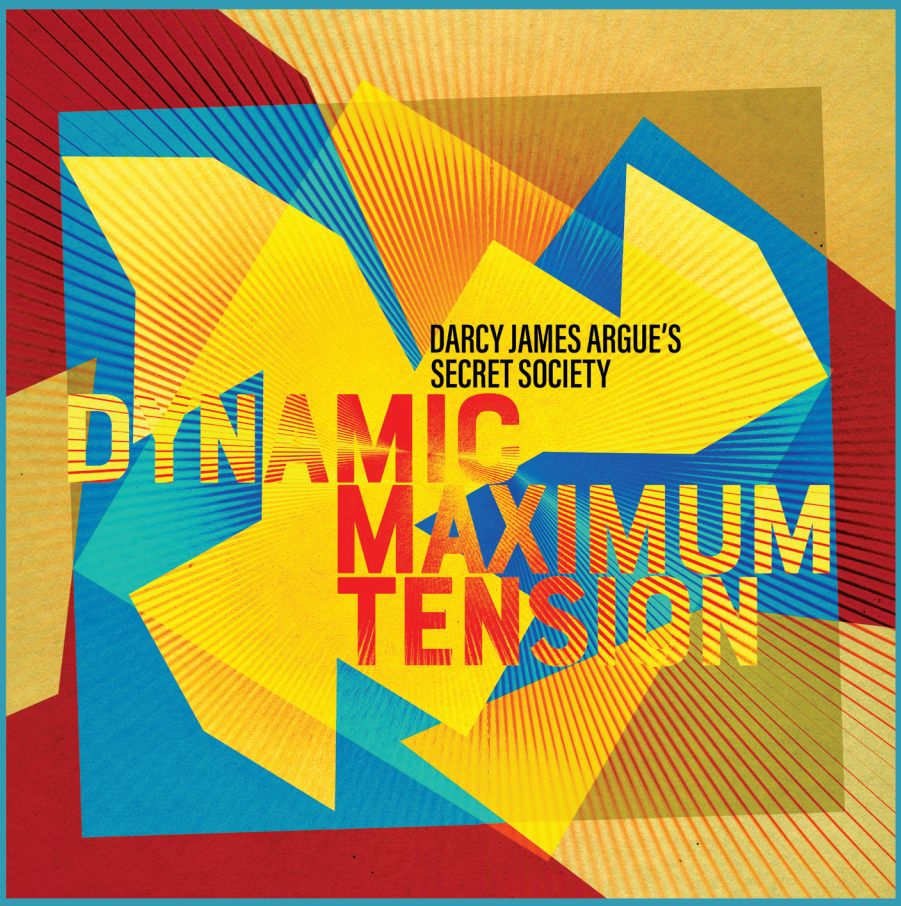
Ordering info: circle9music.com

Where most jazz musicians have avoided folk music (outliers who prove the rule: Stan Kenton, Gary Peacock), in ***Open Spaces: Folk Songs Reimagined*** **(Cellar Music; ★★★ 75:01)**, the **Daniel Hersog Jazz Orchestra** finds opportunity in virgin land. But the poignancy John Ford could summon with a simple harmonica is elusive here because folk melodies recoil from erudition. Scott Robinson's simple bari makes something of "Shenandoah," but Kurt Rosenwinkel's moving guitar on "Red River Valley" is emotionally contradicted by the cool urbanity of the brass. Hersog's charts are smart and well-intended, but perhaps a bit upscale for the neighborhood. He also draws material from many sources, much of which may be less widely shared, which is un-folkish. But stars for the quality and effort.

Ordering info: cellarlive.com

Turkish Hipster: Tales From Swing To Psychedelic **(Dünya; ★★★ 57:24)** by **Mehmet Ali Sanlikol** concocts a global cocktail by mixing the microtonal flavors of Turkish music, then shaking well in a big-band pitcher with guests Anat Cohen, Miguel Zenón and Antonio Sánchez. We hear Cohen play with a fluid formality. But Zenón gets the space to spread out on "A Capoeira Turca," an inviting five-part piece of several simple themes, one of which suggests Jerome Kern ("Smoke Gets In Your Eyes") more than anything Turkish. "Abraham Suite" is a three-part work commissioned for large orchestra and reduced here to big-band dimensions. A pompous fanfare leads into what seems like a tedious protest chant. Part two delivers fitting exotica and some decent solos, but spirals into a somewhat undisciplined turmoil before returning to its nest. It concludes with a lyric on eternity, which is not nearly as hip as the worthy guest players. **DB**

Ordering info: dunya.bandcamp.com



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MARK SHELDON

MdCL, a.k.a. Mark de Clive-Lowe

'He's the Chameleon'

MdCL Bridges the Gap Between What *Was* and What *Is*

"Do you mind taking your shoes off?" asked Mark de Clive-Lowe, in a respectfully cheery New Zealander accent. I certainly didn't mind, doing as he requested while stepping through the door into a spacious apartment in an interesting, less-defined neighborhood of Los Angeles, tucked somewhere between Silverlake and Koreatown. It feels more like a city here, compared to the winding hills or sprawling valleys in other parts of Southern California. Urbania is perhaps more comfortable for one who spent a decade of his life in London and much of his childhood in Tokyo. (Not long after this interview, he would give up his apartment, spending a few weeks hanging with musicians in Brazil before returning to Japan for a three-month residency, proof of how his music crosses boundaries of both genre and culture.)

The artist known commonly by his DJ-friendly handle as MdCL has always been an enigma in regard to his identity as both an individual and a musician. Born in Auckland to his New Zealander father and Japanese mother, he began studying piano at age 4, became enamored with jazz as a teen and studied it at Berklee in Boston, and by 1998 he ultimately found himself in London, helping to pioneer and perfect the intricacies of the broken-beat scene there. When he relocated to Los Angeles in 2008, he serendipitously reconnected with his early jazz roots through Nia Andrews, a singer and daughter of the late jazz musician and educator Reggie Andrews, who mentored some of L.A.'s storied and more recent jazz icons: Patrice Rushen, Rickey Minor, Terrace Martin, Kamasi Washington, Thundercat. "She was huge in bringing me into that community," said MdCL. "And, she had a piano." He and Andrews married and had a son. They have since divorced, but thanks to her his love for the piano and jazz was rekindled and has remained so.

The jazz artists MdCL met in L.A. have spearheaded a West Coast resurgence of a new kind of jazz fusion — that of the Afrocentric post-Coltrane "spiritual jazz" movement of

the '60s that was reflected in this city by the likes of Alice Coltrane, Horace Tapscott, Billy Higgins and Azar Lawrence, with the electronic rap and beat scenes propagated in the 2000s by artists like Ras G, the Gaslamp Killer, Daedelus and Flying Lotus (the latter being non-coincidentally the nephew of Alice Coltrane). It was into this melting pot of music and culture that MdCL stepped into when he arrived from London in 2008. In a way, he is a walking embodiment of what has been happening to the creative music scene in L.A. MdCL has seamlessly interfused his rediscovered skills as a pianist and jazz improviser into his extensive knowledge of and experience with beat music, in a way that pays homage to both traditions while forging something entirely new and defining of his own sound, a crafting honed to a razor's edge on his 2023 album *Hotel San Claudio* (Soul Bank), a trio collaboration with drummer/DJ Shigeto and vocalist/flutist Melanie Charles.

> ***'I love this idea where the technology becomes an actor in the conversation.'***

When drummer Harvey Mason first reached out to MdCL for a project, the keyboardist was rather intimidated at first by the prospect of living up to the legacy of whom Mason had worked with. "Herbie [Hancock] alone is enough, right?" he asked rhetorically. It was only until he invited Mason to play on one of his shows that it clicked. After seeing and hearing all of MdCL's keyboards and electronics in person, he asked, "Why don't you bring that on my gigs?"

"He's a fantastic musician," said Mason of MdCL, speaking by phone from La Quinta, California. "I love using him because he bridges the gap between what *was* and what *is*. He adds colors and sounds and loops that enhance my playing, and also it helps me on a creative tip — it's not just playing drums; I feel like I'm playing *music*. It's really a lot of fun, and if I don't have it, I miss it." Mason has played with virtually all the best jazz pianists in the world (many of whom can be heard on his two expansive, excellent albums of straightahead piano trios, 2004's *With All My Heart* (Bluebird) and 2006's *Changing Partners* (Videoarts), but he told me MdCL brings another dimension to the music that he especially enjoys. They first played together on Mason's 2014 album *Chameleon* (Concord), and the drummer has had MdCL in his band ever since. "He's very creative, and he can play just straight piano great, as well. He can do a lot of the old things," he affirmed. "My band is the Chameleon Band, and he's the chameleon."

Inside a bedroom at the rear of the apartment, MdCL leads me toward his rig, which looks a bit like something one might see on the bridge of the *Enterprise*. The elaborate amalgamation of keyboards, touchpads and other MIDI controllers is exactly what he uses for his shows. "When the pandemic happened," he recounted, "I said [to myself] I might as well set all my shit up, since I'm not going anywhere." He further streamlined the setup, converting from routing his sounds through an analog mixer to now being able to run everything through his Apple laptop.

"It's fundamentally a software setup, but it's such that I can add analog gear or mic acoustic instruments," MdCL explained as he sat behind the controls. Two MIDI controllers anchor the rig, an 88-key weighted action board that runs either piano (Native Instruments Komplete) or Rhodes (Scarbee) samples, and a non-weighted 72-key board stacked above it for synth sounds. If the venue has a piano, he can swap out the lower keyboard and place the synth board on top of the piano, miking the instrument himself to run into his system, allowing him to control the acoustic instrument as if it were a digital sample. On the right side of his main MIDI controller rests a Novation Bass Station II, one of a number of devices that produce their own sounds. All inputs are interfaced to the computer via a Focusrite Clarett+ 8Pre, on a separate stand to the left of the keyboards, placed directly underneath his laptop.

For his DAW, MdCL uses Abelton Live, befitting any electronic music producer. In keeping with that paradigm, his main digital controller for Ableton is a Native Instruments Maschine, which is used primarily as a drum pad, but MdCL reserves one bank for all his synth presets, which he then can play on his secondary keyboard controller. He is able to quickly switch synth patches simply by hitting one of the 16 pads on the Maschine. "It's a really convenient way to change the patch, based on visual memory," he said. Stacked on top of the left side of the upper keyboard controller is a Novation Launch Control, a digital mixer which allows him to mix in real time every sound, from keyboard to bass to drums and percussion as well as live analog sounds like piano or saxophone, and add effects like low or high pass, delay and reverb to any of those sounds.

Back on the left underneath his computer and audio interface, MdCL has what could be the equivalent of a DJ table, only instead of dual turntables he has twin Korg KP3+ Kaoss Pads, sample loopers with a touchscreen that can quickly manipulate and distort the incoming sound. "It's a super-fun way to be tactile about effects, without worrying about parameters so much," he said. He demonstrated their capability by looping a piano riff, altering the tone via the touchpad, then he surprisingly reached back over to the lower keyboard and slid his fingers along an iPad mini sitting inconspicuously on it to the left. Instantly, the tempo slowed down to a dirge, and MdCL quickly moved back to the Maschine and punched out a slow funk beat under the new groove. The app on the tablet is called "Touchable" by Zerodebug, allowing yet another tactile controller for the many features in Ableton.

"My whole mission is to not be on the computer," MdCL summarized. "That's for emergency use only — break glass in case of emergency." He restarted the initial sample, then layered a short synth melody on the Bass Station, grabbed the sample with the Kaoss Pad, "chopped" the sample into essentially a short fragment and then sped it up via Touchable into a pulsating beat. This took all of 24 seconds. He can do this same thing to any instrument on stage: saxophone, bass, vocals or even the entire band, since all the audio is running into his DAW.

"I love this idea where the technology becomes an actor in the conversation," said MdCL, enthusiastically. "We've had moments where I swear, we had some avant-garde jazz shit, and the dance hall is just bumpin'. If I just suddenly muted all the electronics, it would sound like [being] in the middle of some Sun Ra madness. But that marriage of the two, it becomes an interesting counter-culture narrative of sound."

A marriage of a jazz improviser's mentality and harmonic sensibilities into the extended family of hip-hop and electronic music, creating a synthesis that is simultaneously interesting, artistic and entertaining.

It sounds like the future. **DB**

IRINA LOGRA

Every Bulgarian time signature represents a dance with different steps, according to Kirov.

Practice Hand Independence Using Bulgarian Rhythms

Numerous music cultures across the world have developed complex rhythm structures and grooves over the course of many centuries. Rhythmic devices such as beat cycles, polyrhythms, asymmetrical groupings and patterns in traditional music from different corners of the world have been well-documented in the last 120 years.

In fact, quite a few of them have become a main ingredient in today's music universe — from the "classical" and film music worlds, through jazz and some more adventurous pop, to prog-rock and mathcore. Although the asymmetrical rhythms (sometimes also called odd, irregular or uneven) can be found in quite a few cultures, most prominently in the Balkan and Middle East regions, nowhere else do they have such a variety of beat groupings and combinations as in Bulgaria.

One of the first Western musicologists to shed light on this fact was the great Hungarian composer Béla Bartók. Through his travels and research he discovered that although a few of those rhythms (mainly 5/8, 7/8 and 9/8) could be found in the music of other countries in the region, Bulgarian music had this large variety that included mixed rhythms (groups of measures, each with a different meter), and meters of 11, 13, 15 or even 18 eighth-notes found virtually nowhere else. This prompted Bartók to call all asymmetrical rhythms "Bulgarian" in his writings and music.

Now, my goal here is not some strange kind of a nationalistic rhythm chauvinism or a deep dive into the history of these rhythms, but rather to take a look at them from the perspective of a contemporary improvising pianist and composer. There are a myriad of ways one can utilize asymmetrical (a.k.a. uneven-beat) meters in their music. As they have been a part of my musical journey since the day I was born (thanks to my Bulgarian musician parents), I have developed ways to practice and become comfortable with them, and to make them sound organic in your playing and compositions. Here, I will share some of these ideas with you.

A common mistake some Western musicians make when playing uneven-beat rhythms is counting every eighth-note subdivision (as in "one-and, two-and, three-and-a") and accenting every beat. We can attribute this to them lacking enough comfort with the rhythms and needing to count every eighth note in order to not get lost. We should always remember that these rhythms actually are dances and every Bulgarian time signature represents a dance with different steps, although sometimes the steps of the same dance meter vary from region to region. What this means to us as musicians is that we have to groove in the rhythm, to feel comfortable in feeling and playing the larger beats (and groups of beats) the way dancers do, instead of focusing on the subdivisions.

For instance, in 7/8 we should not count the eighth-note subdivisions as I pointed out earlier, but focus on the larger beats: quarter, quarter, dotted quarter (or the first, third and fifth eighth-note, if you prefer to think this way). Dancers think of these beats as short and long steps. This way, the music should flow in "one-two-*threee*" or "short-short-*looong*" motion and when in faster tempos — in two beats (half note + dotted quarter). This level of comfort can be achieved with diligent practice with metronome in a variety of tempi (from very slow to very fast) where you start off with the click hitting every eighth note and then switching to only the large beats.

Finally, you should experiment with the click playing only on the downbeats of measures, or in longer metric structures such as 11/8 (2+2+3+2+2) having the click only on the first and the third beat (i.e. the first and the fifth eighth-notes). When practicing, you should always have a plan for your articulation as well. You can practice the same exercise in a few different ways: completely legato with even tone, non-legato with even tone, staccato, and then with accents on different beats (i.e. in 7/8 you can accent only the downbeat or the downbeat and the third beat (i.e. the first and the fifth eighth-notes). You can also practice each hand playing in different dynamics and/or accenting different beats in a measure for the ultimate hand independence exercise.

In the present day, one can find a rich variety of rhythmic structures in many different types of traditional and contemporary music. It is not possible to cover all of these in a short article, but I would like to share with you the most common time signatures in traditional Bulgarian music. These meters offer us a different way of grooving and new compositional devices regardless of what genre of music you are creating.

It is crucial to remember that just like in jazz, the feel is important and there are a variety of ways to perform the Bulgarian uneven-beat time signatures — with a swing feel, playing on top or on the back of the beat, being locked in with the metronome/pocket. You can experiment with the interpretation of the

meters, thus creating a very personal style of performance. Besides dances in 2/4 and 6/8, in Bulgarian music also popular are 5/8 (2+3) called *Paidushko*, 7/8 (2+2+3 called *Rachenitza* and 3+2+2), 8/8 (3+2+3 and 3+3+2), 9/8 (2+3+2+2 and 2+2+2+3 called *Daichovo*), 11/8 (2+2+3+2+2) called *Kopanitza*, 13/8 (2+2+2+3+2+2) and 15/8 (2+2+2+2+3+2+2) called *Buchimish*. There are also other unique rhythms and mixed meters that are used around the country. However, they are not as prevalent in the Bulgarian culture as a whole, but rather confined to certain regions.

Example 1a shows an exercise in D Hijaz, an Arabic *maqam* (modal structure, mode) widely used in the music of the Balkans, Middle East, Northern Africa, Spanish flamenco, and known in jazz as the fifth mode of the harmonic minor. It is in 7/8 meter (3+2+2) where each hand plays a different melodic line with a specific rhythm: The right hand plays eighth note subdivisions while the left hand is playing the large beats. At first, you should always practice hands separately. When ready to put them together, start in a slower tempo with even legato tone. When you are comfortable with the exercise in a variety of tempi, you can start practicing with accents as detailed above.

In Example 1b, the melodic lines have switched hands. Both exercises can and should be played in other keys as well. A simpler version of this exercise is to play each line with both hands separated by an octave or two.

Examples 2a, 2b and 2c show a one-measure exercise phrase in 7/16 (2+2+3 or rather 4+3) in a major key that is meant to be performed chromatically all across the keyboard. You can repeat each bar as many times as you wish before moving a half step up. The trick here is to feel the groove in two beats (quarter and dotted eighth note) instead of three (eighth, eighth, dotted eighth). This dance rhythm is meant to be performed fast (hence grouping the first two short beats into one longer beat). Work with the metronome hitting only the first and the fifth 16th-note. Practice even legato tone and then with accents.

Example 3 is based on the half-whole diminished (a.k.a. octatonic) scale and is in 11/8 (2+2+3+2+2), a popular Bulgarian dance called *Kopanitza*. Here again, you should practice with metronome in a variety of ways: legato with even tone/touch, with accents, in different tempi and dynamics. You can repeat each measure twice or more before moving a half step up for the next measure.

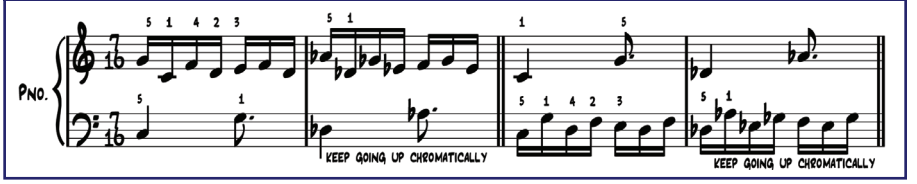
By now, I trust you are getting the gist of this approach to practicing complex rhythmic structures and hand independence. One of the exciting aspects of this type of creative playing is that the possibilities are endless. You can use any scale, mode, maqam or raga and create your own rhythm exercises using simple, compound, asymmetrical and mixed meters. When creating and practicing such exercises or pieces of music, always remember about these two aspects of performance: the rhythm and the articulation. With rhythm you have to be aware of how you feel the beats: are you subdividing, are you feeling the larger beats, are you playing on top or the back of the beat, are you in the pocket? With articulation, you must practice legato, non-legato, staccato, with and without accents — all in a wide range of dynamics. When you pay attention to these factors and make them a part of your practice regimen, your playing and musical thought will reach new levels without a doubt. **DB**

Dr. Milen Kirov is a Bulgarian-American performer, composer and educator whose career redefines the role of the performer-composer in 21st century by transcending genres, labels and artistic boundaries. Combining his Bulgarian music heritage and concert pianist background with contemporary composition, jazz, world music and improvisation, Dr. Kirov has carved a career as a unique and respected artist. He is also the creator and director of the internationally acclaimed 11-piece "peasant funk" band Orkestar MÉZÉ. As a solo artist, bandleader and producer, Kirov has released four albums and several singles on his own Luta Rakia Music label, and has appeared on numerous other records on labels such as Sony BMG, MRi and A.i. Music. Milen's compositions and performances have been featured on dozens of radio and TV stations on four continents. He has written music for film and theater as well. Besides as a pianist, Dr. Kirov is known also as a keyboardist who utilizes a wide range of acoustic, analog and digital keyboard instruments such as harpsichord, organ, accordion, Hammond B-3, Fender Rhodes and synthesizers. Born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Milen Kirov started playing the piano at age 4. He holds degrees from California State University, Northridge and California Institute of the Arts. Currently Dr. Kirov resides in Los Angeles, where he is an Associate Professor of Piano, Composition and Theory at Los Angeles City College. He frequently gives master classes and lectures, and serves as a jury in piano, jazz and chamber music competitions. Visit him online at milenkirov.net.

Example 1a

Example 1b

Example 2a **Example 2b**



Example 2c

Example 3

Hammer recommends practicing blindfolded in order to get to know your instrument and have it become an extension of you.

All About Arranging: How Choices Define Our Voices

Though I aspire to be as great as Herbie or Chick or Oscar or Art or Thelonious or Keith (in my case, Keith Emerson), I will always be Tom Hammer. And I have to remind myself of that from time to time. And though I try to grab a piece of those who inspire, I have to play with my own voice and spirit and enjoy the music as I play it and express how I feel. It's so easy to compare and judge ourselves to others, especially now when you hear so many great players online. But instead of dwelling on how you measure up to the greats, let's talk about finding your own voice and style — a much more constructive activity than YouTube-gazing.

I remember when I was really little, before any lessons, just sitting and messing around at the piano. It was a lot of exploration and discovery and so exciting. Seems like I'd forgotten that and don't spend nearly enough time exploring for myself since I've been so busy chasing everyone else. I think it's a question of what-ifs. If I have this note in the melody, and it's this chord, what if I arrange the other notes this way or that way or add a note not in the chord or alter a note?

In an interview with Joe Sample, he said that below the melody note, all notes are a possibility. So in the end it all comes down to what it sounds like and what sounds you like. Do you like voicings that are spread out or voicing with clusters? Or a bit of both? Does the melody always have to be in the right hand? I hope not. And if you do put the melody in the left hand, then it's going to change how you approach what you play in your right hand. And it's hard work looking at something in a completely different way. But it's great practice and great for your ear. And when you find something you like, make an exercise out of it. Tun it through every key and really get to know it so it becomes a part of you.

Take something you've only played in one key, something with a nice elaborate arrangement, and then check it out in all the other keys. It's surprising what it will look and feel like in another key, but it will start to open up more possibilities. Try practicing blindfolded. Erroll Garner never looked at his hands — he was too busy smiling and looking at the audience, and his hands were all over the keyboard. This is the way you get to know your instrument, feel your instrument and have the instrument become an extension of you.

Feel the the flow of the music. If there is no flow, then it will become stuck and feel labored. This will result in a feeling of fighting yourself. And that's the last thing we want. This is why all the great players look as if their playing is effortless. They are relaxed and free and *let* the music happen instead of trying to *make* it happen.

So the choices about what to play are all about arranging. And arranging is everything. Look at the Sinatra recording of "I've Got You Under My Skin." The intro has a melody in the bass with a 6/9 chord in fourths played by the horns. Then the piano plays fourths in the upper register, which also works when the next chord is played: the ii7 chord over the pedal bass, which is approached by chromatic fourths in the horns. It covers such a wide register, with the bass in the low register, horn pad in the middle and piano up top. The arranger, of course, is Nelson Riddle.

When you get in a rut and think it's all been done, stop and take a listen to this or anything else that is truly inspiring. All this can be played on solo piano. The beauty and challenge for solo piano is trying to cover all the parts yourself: picking out the key elements of a group arrangement and translating it to work at the piano, whether it's a pop song, classic rock song, or big band or classical work. Check out guitar tabs and play them on piano. Andy Summers' guitar voicings are great to explore on piano. And, again, it's all about how he arranged those chords on the guitar that helped create the sound of the Police. There are so many places to find inspiration and then run with it, reshape it and make it your own.

With all the available instruction online, it's very easy to get distracted and lose sight of one's self, and to lose sight of one's own exploration of the piano. There are so many possibilities — they just have to be discovered.

It's such a great feeling to make a new discovery. Give yourself a day and just see where your practice takes you. Step out of your routine for a change. Yes, you need the basics and the foundation and theory and technique, but there's so much on the fringe. Go ahead and mess around on your instrument, you may even stumble upon a happy mistake. You only need the time and curiosity to go there.

Know your voice

In closing, here are some additional tips on how to discover and develop your voice:

• Limitation breeds creativity. I was having a problem with a couple notes on my digital keyboard one gig, so I was limited to the range in which I could play my solo. It ended up being one of my best solos. I played much more rhythmically and reworked a motive in all sorts of different ways, since I was limited to the range of one octave.

• Make a list of your weaknesses: maybe soloing in certain keys or over a particular set of changes, or two-handed rhythmic patterns, or left-hand stride variations. Most importantly, make the list and practice — get on it.

• Let your ears guide your hands, not the other way around. **DB**

Tom Hammer is a pianist, composer and producer who lives in New Jersey. He studied classical piano performance at William Paterson College and has written music for ESPN for the last 20 years. Tom collaborated with Cyndi Lauper on the Grammy/Tony-winning musical *Kinky Boots*. He also accompanied Lisa Fischer in the Oscar/Grammy winning documentary *20 Feet From Stardom*. Hammer has toured extensively with The Family Stand. He also has a few song cowrites with Prince. Hammer is a Casio artist. Visit him online at tomhammer.com.

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COURTESY ELIANE ELIAS

Elias plays a 24-bar bebop style blues

Eliane Elias' Piano Solo on 'Impulsive!'

Although her 1997 album *Impulsive!* (Stunt Records) was recorded with the large Danish Radio Jazz Orchestra, on the title track pianist and composer Eliane Elias starts her solo in a trio setting, backed only by bass and drums.

We wouldn't be able to fit her entire solo here, so I've started it where the groove starts to solidify and provided two full choruses, just up until the rest of the ensemble enters with an interlude. It's a 24-bar bebop-style blues at a brisk 274 bpm, though it does start out with a half-time feel, and it's not until the second transcribed chorus that the rhythm section really lays into the fast swing.

Elias plays with this half-time/fast tempo disparity, sometimes playing quarter-note lines, which could sound like eighths if one is hearing the half tempo (as in measures 2–3, 21–27 and sort of 35–36), as well as eighth-note lines (5–8, 17–18, 41–48). Notice that not all the quarter-note lines are in the half-time section and not all the eighth-note lines are in the fast section. She's playing on our perception of time. Kind of like one of those graphics that can appear to be two different things depending on how you look at it.

I also really like her use of space and the dialogue between her hands. In the places where the melody drops down into the bass clef (bars 6–9, 46–48), the left hand lays out, creating a sense of space within the denseness of the melody line. (Notice the left hand doesn't just stop when the right crosses over, it's been out from 5–11 and 43 until the end.)

As a corollary, when there's space in the melody is when the left hand fills in (15–16, 28, 31–32 and 38–40). It isn't a one-hand-or-the-other thing, though. Through much of her improvisation, Elias uses both hands together, but these sections where she limits it to one hand create a positive vs. negative space sense of openness and density together.

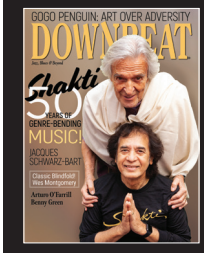
Adding to this, though the right hand is restricted to single notes (with the exceptions being bars 19 and 36, and in both of these instances the left hand does not support the right), the left hand plays three-note groups (fairly typical of jazz piano playing) and also diads and single notes. She's varying both the vertical and horizontal density.

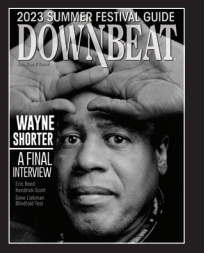
There also doesn't appear to be a dividing line between melody and accompaniment in terms of range. The solo line drops as far as the low G in bass clef (bar 47), which is actually much lower than her comping ever goes. The comping reaches up to the G in treble clef (measure 40), which means there is a lot of overlap between where Elias hears the melody and accompaniment. In fact, it's really more texture that separates the two, with Elias really digging in on the solo and tending to comp much lighter. This is especially necessary since the overlap I spoke of can sometimes occur temporally. Some examples: The high G in the left hand in bar 1 is the final note of the melody in the following measure.

The same thing happens with the high E in the bass clef in the next measure. The D♭ that begins her solo line in measure 17 is the top note of Elias' left-hand chords in that bar and the next. Bars 31–33 have left-hand chords whose high pitches go from C up to E♭ and back down to C. In the next bar, her melody starts off on the same C, and following that the chords have a D a step above that. So the parts never cross but the border between them is treated as movable.

And it would have to be. Her right hand alone covers an area of just over four octaves. By contrast, the left hand seems restricted to an octave and a third. This is curious, especially as this comping range sits within the domain of the soloing range. Notice also that when Elias plays long, flowing lines, that's usually when she covers the most range, as in bars 17–20 and 41–48. Measures 5–8 don't travel as far, but do sort of set us up for the later excursions. **DB**

Jimi Durso is a guitarist and bassist based in the New York area. He recently released an album of Indian classical music played on the string bass, titled *Border Of Hiranyaloka*. Find out more at jimidurso.bandcamp.com.





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Kawai CA401 & CA501 Digital Pianos

2 Powerful Midline Models Reach New Levels of Authenticity

Kawai makes the kind of digital pianos that are a natural fit in a traditional piano showroom. During a recent visit to Cordogan's Pianoland in Geneva, Illinois, Kawai's newly upgraded series of Concert Artist digital pianos were right at home on display among the store's renowned inventory of fine acoustic grands, baby grands and consoles.

That's because Kawai's digital Concert Artist models — the CA401, CA 501, CA701 and CA901 — not only sound exactly like high-end Kawai pianos (and sport appropriately elegant looks), they also feel just like playing the real thing, as revealed by recent play-testing. Their wooden key actions and ivory touch key surfaces come straight out of Kawai's piano R&D, and their sounds have been upgraded to include the new Competition Grand piano sample, which is recorded from the player's perspective and provides a clearer, more realistic-sounding concert grand experience. The CA samples capture the tone of the flagship Shigeru Kawai 9-foot SK-EX Concert Grand and the 6-foot 7-inch SK-5 Chamber Grand — ultra-performance level instruments respected worldwide for their exquisite tone and touch — plus a variety of other acoustic piano and instrument sounds.

The high-end CA701 ($4,389–$5,599) and flagship CA901 ($6,399–$7,299) are for more advanced players who require an instrument of the finest construction with the most refined and nuanced sounds possible. They replace the company's CA79 and CA99 digital pianos, respectively. The more budget-friendly CA401 ($3,099) and CA501 ($3,999), featuring great sounds and a compact version of the company's Grand Feel wooden key action, are major entries to the mid-level digital piano market. Our play-test focused mainly on these two models, which are ideal digital options for pianists who play all the time and crave the feeling of a real acoustic instrument. (The CA401 and CA501 replace previous Kawai digital piano models CA49 and CA59.)

The beauty of the CA401 is that it's an "everything you need and nothing you don't" instrument, which will appeal to players looking to replace their old piano and don't care about tons of features. It has 19 sampled sounds and 40 watts of stereo power, enough to easily fill a room. The action is impeccable and it plays like a dream.

The redesigned CA501 has 45 sounds, an improved control panel with a large OLED display, a metronome with 100 rhythm styles and an enhanced Virtual Technician feature that allows pianists to customize various parameters regarding the tone of each sound. The CA501's 100-watt speaker system has been enhanced by 360-degree diffuser panels on the top-mounted speakers that expand the sound distribution in all directions. Kawai also updated the CA501's cabinet design, adopting the taller body and rounded edge details of the larger Concert Artist models, for a more contemporary look. Both the the CA401 and CA501 are available in rosewood, satin black and satin white cabinet finishes.

In addition to acoustic pianos, the CA501 also features an excellent selection of additional instrument sounds, ranging from dynamic electric pianos, realistic drawbar organs, lofty church organs, vibrant strings, astounding human choirs and even atmospheric synth-style pads.

One major improvement over previous models in the CA series is the immediate attack of each note as experienced by the player. "It's much more solid, partly because the audio team that did the sampling used a custom mic that they used from the player perspective, picking up the sound from that position," said Alan Palmer, Digital Piano Product Manager for Kawai America Corp. "It's not a faster or harder attack, it's just solid. There's nothing lacking in there or any kind of lag. Some sample pianos feel like no matter what, they're never quite fast and don't have that instant connection with the player. This one has a nice, pleasing attack. The other thing Kawai went for was more of the string ring that you get from a big piano. The way they recorded it gives it a much more natural sound, like how a big concert grand really sounds."

The bass range is a little better balanced on the CA models now as well. The new samples were taken from one of the latest Shigeru models, one that was chosen for its tonal clarity and had been used in several competitions. The meticulously sampled sounds afford pianists an extraordinary level of expressiveness ranging from the softest pianissimo to the strongest fortissimo, a rare quality for a digital piano in this price range.

The CA401 and CA501 are compatible with Kawai's PianoRemote app and offer built-in Alfred lessons as well as Czerny, Chopin and Burgmuller pieces. In addition, both models are now compatible with Bluetooth MIDI V5 and Bluetooth audio V5.

The power adaptor on these new digitals has been upgraded to provide smoother, cleaner sound. And Kawai's three-pedal configuration has been repositioned to more accurately replicate the height and feel of real grand piano pedals. It functions exquisitely and gives just the right amount of resistance to promote a real-feel and accommodate the subtle pedaling techniques used by advanced players.

The CA401 and CA501 attain superior levels of authenticity and make for two great new entires to the midline digital piano market. —*Ed Enright*

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MicroFreak from Arturia is a peculiar instrument that rewards the curious musician. It blends wavetable and digital oscillators with analog filters, and adds controlled randomness to sequences. It features a unique poly-aftertouch flat keyboard. MicroFreak has a versatile digital oscillator so you can create rare and interesting sounds with ease. Modes like Wavetable, KarplusStrong, Harmonic OSC and three granular engines give musicians the chance to explore new possibilities.

More info: arturia.com

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An updated incarnation of its predecessors with all the original features, the Behringer Neutron lets you conjure up virtually any monophonic sound imaginable with finesse and ease. The pure analog signal path is based on authentic VCO, VCF, VCA and state variable filter designs in conjunction with a flexible, multi-wave LFO and classic Bucket Brigade Delay (BBD). Neutron can be mounted in a standard Eurorack, making it ideal for the studio or the road.

More info: behringer.com

3. Modeling Synth

Roland's SYSTEM-8 synth architecture includes authentic models of classic oscillators, filters and effects. It even has down-to-the-circuit recreations of the JUPITER-8, JUNO-106 and JX-3P built-in, not to mention the collection of legendary synths available on Roland Cloud. It has multiple flavors of digital and analog-style oscillators including Saw, Square, Triangle, SuperSaw, FM and more completely unique waveforms. Filter options include the famous JUPITER and JUNO filters as well as more recent designs like the unique Side Band Filter.

More info: roland.com

4. Virtual Analog Synth

Sledge 2.0 from Studiologic is a mix of pure synthesis and sound sampling. New features expand the synthesizer's power and versatility. Combine and play two sounds at the same time, in Split or Layer mode. Every sound combination can be stored in any of the 999 available presets. Sound samples and new waves can be loaded in the internal memory, played by OSC 1 and modifiable by all parameters of the control panel.

More info: studiologic-music.com

5. FM Synth

The Korg volca fm is a six-voice, six-operator FM synthesizer with all 32 classic algorithms, a 16-step loop sequencer, effects and a powerful arpeggiator that reproduces the sound of the Yamaha DX7 and is completely compatible with SYS-EX patches for the DX7. The volca fm is the ultimate portable FM solution for all musicians. This new generation has double the voices of its predecessor, added effects, and expanded its MIDI connectivity and intuitive interface. With six voices (instead of the three of its predecessor), the volca fm brings a new world of harmonic possibilities to your production.

More info: korg.com

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LAUREN DESBERG

"I think most jazz musicians exist in a space where the unknown is actually pretty thrilling," said Sara Gazarek about putting together the new jazz vocal program at Eastman School of Music.

Gazarek Heads New Eastman Vocal Program

EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC AT THE University of Rochester, founded in 1921, celebrated its centennial a year late because of COVID, but it did so in style, commissioning more than 40 world premieres, many composed by Eastman graduates. But the school is not content with resting on past achievements, especially when it comes to jazz education.

In 1995 Eastman began offering an undergraduate degree in jazz studies to complement its existing master's degree program. It resulted in a dramatic expansion

This past June, Eastman announced another major expansion of its jazz and contemporary media program: adding a jazz voice undergraduate degree program that will begin in Fall 2024. Vocalist and educator Sara Gazarek will lead the new program, with the tenure-track title of associate professor of jazz voice.

"We began putting together a skeleton of a jazz voice program two years ago," said Jamal Rossi, the Joan and Martin Messinger dean of school. "But we needed to find the right jazz vocalist — someone who's also a great teacher and has the ability to build a great program. And Sara certainly is the ideal candidate."

Gazarek has built an impressive resume since releasing her debut album, *Yours*, in 2005. She now has four additional studio albums to her credit: *Return To You*, *Blossom & Bee*, *Dream In The Blue* and *Thirsty Ghost*, as well as a recent EP, *Vanity*. She is a founding member of the vocal group säje, which also includes Amanda Taylor, Johnaye Kendrick and Erin Bentlage. Gazarek has earned three Grammy nominations: two for *Thirsty Ghost* and one for säje's debut recording. She has taught for the last 12 years at the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California.

"I'm looking forward to being invited into a space at Eastman where there's curiosity and openness," said Gazarek. "They've said, 'We trust that you know how to teach vocal jazz.' It's a beautiful gift to hear someone say, 'We want you in this role. How can we help you?' That's huge."

"At Eastman we realize we're not the experts at teaching vocal jazz," explained Rossi. "We're looking to Sara to bring her expertise to refine what the curriculum will become over the next year. Sara's a person of energy, intelligence and warmth. I'm so excited about what she's going to bring to the school."

For Gazarek, her role in shaping the Eastman vocal jazz program also presents an opportunity to bridge the gap between jazz education and the world of professional jazz performance.

"It's an opportunity to put together a program to address what our jazz vocal students really need to help them thrive in the world of performance art," she said. "It's thrilling to me to have the opportunity to pull from what I've learned as a jazz musician and in dedicating my life to this art form, and I want to use that experience to change the way the program is designed, and help students provide what the world wants from them.

Gazarek had the chance to experience what it's like to be part of a professional jazz tour before she graduated from the jazz program at the University of Southern California in 2005. After winning a DownBeat Student Music Award, she was chosen to join a national tour that included vocalists Karrin Allyson, Diane Schuur and Oleta Adams.

"I learned so much from them on that tour," she recalled. "How to interface with a sound person. What songs open and close sets well. Even what to do when the merch is lost. Those are all things I didn't learn in school, which turned out to be really important elements of my success as a professional musician."

Gazarek is interested in making sure the new vocal jazz track at Eastman is fully integrated with the school's prestigious instrumental jazz program. Soprano saxophonist, orchestra leader and arranger Christine Jensen, who joined the faculty last year as an assistant professor and director of the acclaimed Eastman Jazz Ensemble, has brought her own fresh perspective to the program — and is looking forward to working with Gazarek.

"Eastman has built a great musical tradition," said Jensen. "But the music changes, the music industry changes, and academic institutions tend to be the last things that change. Eastman has clearly committed to change, and this is a really exciting time. Sara's ideas are going to provide a new balance to things."

"I think there will be important foundational things at the core of what we're hoping to do with the new jazz voice program that I want every student to have access to," said Gazarek. "A deep understanding of music theory, ear training and ensemble work, musicianship, compositional skills and other tools as well. I really want to instill a broad sense of what's available to them in the hope that they can see a path for themselves that's undefined — and also one they can choose how to traverse."

Gazarek officially joined Eastman's faculty on July 1 and is eager to begin shaping the curriculum of the new track as well as getting the word out to begin recruiting the initial class of vocalists who will enroll in the program in the 2024–2025 academic year. "I'll be doing a lot of outreach at the JEN Convention, at feeder high schools and community colleges and doing brainstorming about other ways to get the word out. And I'm also looking forward to being able to keep thriving as a creative individual and a jazz musician," she said. "It's certainly a challenge putting a brand-new program together in a year, but it's also good to have the runway to pull it all together. The idea of the unknown and the path uncharted is exciting — but it's not overwhelming." *—Terry Perkins*

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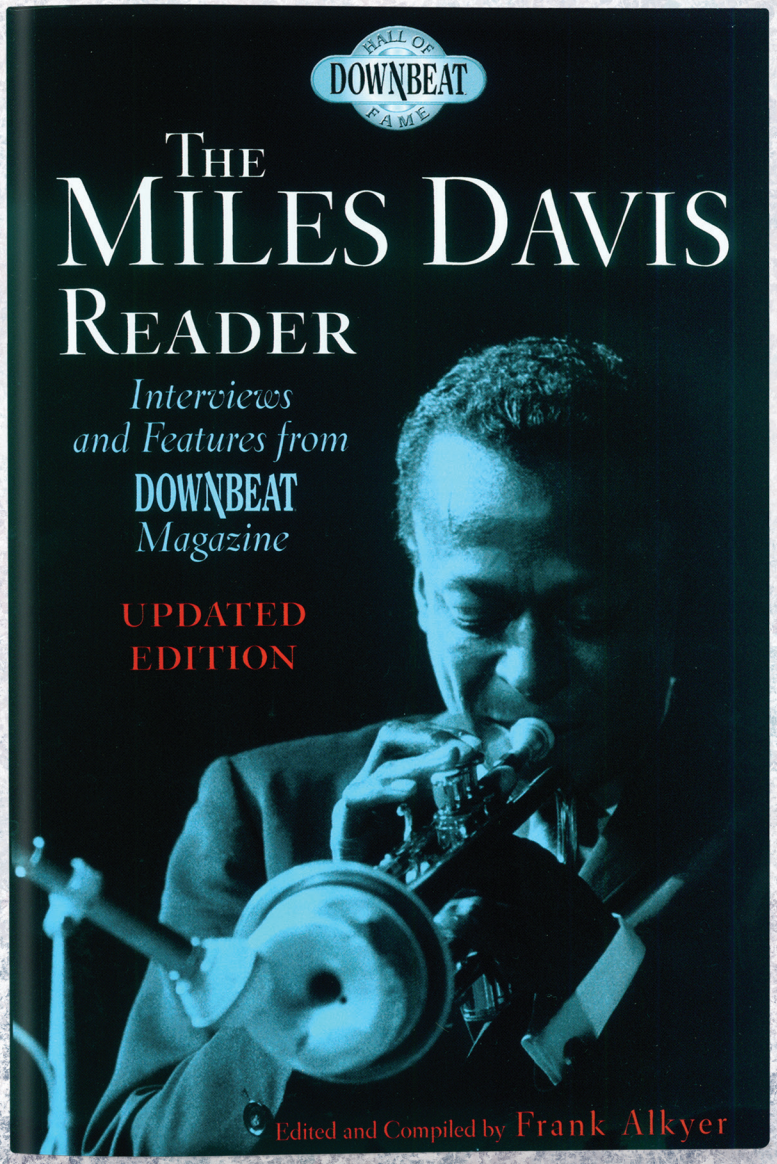

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Summer Style

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Sullivan Fortner

Before taking a live Blindfold Test in Indianapolis during the American Pianists Association Awards last April, pianist Sullivan Fortner was asked to tell the audience about a deal he struck with his father. His father wanted the young pianist to go into medicine. Fortner said no. With tears in his eyes, Fortner's dad relented, but asked his son to do one thing. "He said, 'The only thing I ask is that you go and you get a master's degree," Fortner said. "At least when all else fails, you could teach. So I went to Oberlin and Manhattan School and got a master's degree." The rest is history. Fortner is one of the bright stars on the scene today who happened to win the American Pianists Association Award in 2015. This is his first Blindfold Test. He gave 1,000 stars to every artist because, "If you play a jazz or anything closely remotely to this thing that we call jazz or African-American classical music or American classical music, everybody deserves a thousand stars."

MARK SHELDON

"He was the coolest, Fortner says of Nat "King" Cole. "Didn't break a sweat."

Tommy Flanagan

"Beat's Up" (*Overseas*, Prestige, 1958) Flanagan, piano; Wilbur Little, bass; Elvin Jones, drums.

That's Tommy. This is very early, Tommy, though. It's the way those cats orchestrated, the way they orchestrated the piano and how they used, you know, the blues inflections and registration. [vocalizes it] And something about the beat, and the way that the beat felt, really signaled Detroit to me. Hank Jones. Barry Harris. Sir Roland Hannah. Something in their beat and how it felt. Even Johnny, Johnny O'Neil. Something in the way their rhythm felt — that buoyancy and the looping of the quarter notes.

Geri Allen

"Soul Heir" (*The Gathering*, Verve, 1998) Allen, piano; Buster Williams, bass; Lenny White, drums.

That's Geri. What a sweet lady, man, oh, man. I do have a story, an intimate story. The week that Geri passed, Joan Belgrave, Marcus Belgrave's wife, called me. She said, "I need you to make a playlist for Geri, she's definitely going to transition." And, you know, they wanted me to come up with a playlist for her. So I made a playlist of like Muhal Richard Abrams and Randy Weston and Alice Coltrane, you know, things that I know about Geri and the people that influenced her. … A couple of days after she passed, Joan called me. She said, "She was listening to your playlist when she passed." So it was kind of my gift to her as she was leaving in transition.

Duke Ellington

"Take The A Train" (*Uptown*, Columbia, 1953) Ellington, piano; The Duke Ellington Orchestra.

Ruffin: It's too easy.

Fortner: It was Duke Ellington. I really can't stress this enough. This dude literally was the greatest. Can we actually start it from the top?

Ruffin: This is one of the best piano solos ever to me.

Fortner: Just love it. The greatest. Yes, the absolute greatest. And what was interesting about him is that this particular solo — you can kind of trace from the very first time he played it until the very last time with a few minor adjustments. He pretty much takes the same solo. Like there are certain sections that remain.

Nat "King" Cole

"Caravan" (*Blues*, Jazz At The Philharmonic, Featuring Nat King Cole and Les Paul) Cole, piano; Les Paul, guitar.

That's Nat "King" Cole. Ha! Whoops! How about that? It's just baffling to me. You know, somebody like the man, "King" Cole, who pretty much changed the way jazz piano is played, period, is more known for his singing voice, which is great. There's nothing wrong with his singing. I've learned a lot from his singing. But the piano playing was something pretty spectacular. Pretty spectacular. Pretty perfect.

That was "Caravan." And what's funny about it is that it is very rare that you hear him stride. That's what threw me off. You don't hear him do that much. Everybody came from Nat — Teddy Wilson and Ahmad Jamal. Oscar Peterson.

He was the coolest. Didn't break a sweat.

Ahmad Jamal

"Autumn In New York" (*Live At Bubba's*, Who's Who in Jazz, 1980) Jamal, piano; Sabu Adeyola, bass; Payton Crossley, drums.

It's Ahmad. There it is. I met him a couple times. He told me two things. I asked him once, I said, "How do you come up with those timeless arrangements that last forever." And he said, "I don't eat pork, and I pray every day." The other thing he told me, he said, "Don't do drugs and don't get anybody pregnant." That's my Ahmad Jamal story. [laughs]

Herbie Hancock

"Mimosa" (*Inventions & Dimensions*, Blue Note, 1964) Hancock, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Willie Bobo, drums/timbales; Osvaldo "Chihuahua" Martinez, percussion.

I'm gonna hate myself. Any guesses? [to the audience] Herbie. That's Herbie. Now I hear it. Now it's there. There it is. What record is this?

Ruffin: This album is *Inventions*…

Fortner: *Inventions & Dimensions*. Gahd doggit! Sure is! Sure is. What do you say about Herbie Hancock? Pretty much every piano player who ever played with Miles Davis post-Ahmad was influenced by Ahmad Jamal. So much so that they would pretty much steal Ahmad's arrangements and play them on their records. "Billy Boy" was a perfect example. Miles made Red Garland play it exactly like Ahmad Jamal on the *Milestones* album [Columbia, 1958].

Gerald Clayton

"Scrimmage" (*Two-Shade*, Emarcy, 2009) Clayton, piano; Joe Sanders, bass; Justin Brown, drums.

My generation? I'm down to five, but wait until the solo.

Ruffin: Want more clues? He got it through osmosis.

Fortner: Gerald. That's Gerald Clayton. He was in the three that I was narrowing it down to. At first, there was something he did that almost made me say Christian [Sands]. But then he did something in the beginning, and I said, "Naw, that's probably Gerald," but it's early Gerald because Gerald don't play like that now. **DB**

The "Blindfold Test" is a listening test that challenges the featured artist to discuss and identify the music and musicians who performed on selected recordings. The artist is then asked to rate each tune using a 5-star system. No information is given to the artist prior to the test.

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